Initiating a Gaian

Myshu

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Summary

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How does a child learn the difference between killing and murder? Family and friends? Zidane Tribal's life, from Terra to Tantalus.

1. Initiating a Gaian

A/N: To Isis the cat, my Yan.

"This is the center of the planet. The end and the beginning of the cycle of souls."

At the foot of the observatory stood a man swathed in black… or rather, the exoskeleton of a man. Within his open chest flickered a lurid red heart, alight with the magic and sheer will of a dead race. The balding old man's white hair and beard framed a stern, craggy face.

Before Garland loomed a world in miniature and a globe in grandeur. Cradled in the gaunt paws of Pandemonium, a towering amalgamation of the planet's dead, the giant crystal ball shimmered with the conflicting essences of Gaia, the land of eidolons, and Terra, the wasteland of souls.

From the observatory's deck the sage watched sparse red clouds, Terran souls, swirl and boil over a seamless blue ocean, Gaia's vibrant pool of spirits.

“The light remains Gaia’s, for now, but when the blue changes to crimson, all will belong to Terra, and its restoration will be complete.”

Terra verses Gaia.
Red verses Blue.

The observatory captured the subterfuge in clear colors, ones only Garland, Terra’s overseer, should be privileged to monitor. In years’ time, once the proper players matured and entered the battlefield, he would be standing on the very same spot, watching red swarm over blue until there was not a drop of sweet sapphire left, and then the war of the worlds would finally see vindication. The souls swimming through Gaia would no longer be her own, but those of Terra, its conqueror, and Garland’s perfect vessels, the Genomes, would inherit the spoils.

“The souls of the people of Terra will be received by the Genomes, who will then grow and begin their new lives.”

That would be, if his special Genomes—his angels of death—could stay focused on Terra’s mission.

“Zidane, are you paying attention?”

And one was certainly not. Garland turned around to find his little prodigy balanced upon a shell large enough to fit three more of him on top. He was attempting with fleeting success to spin the disk-shaped top on its wobbly axis, like a merry-go-round. Pandemonium, the castle of the dead, was one big, grotesque playground to him.

Garland pushed an irritated sigh through his nose. “Zidane,” he growled.

Centuries of toying with vapid life and vigorous death left him disarmed against a fresh, living person with his own living soul. The other Genomes were different, if easier to handle. They were empty creatures, spiritually void and grown to fast, aged precision in pods. They took orders well—they took *everything* with the same placid demeanor that was sewn onto their faces from the moment they were spawned.

Zidane would be nothing like them. He couldn’t even be born at a reasonable time, waking from his gene pod as a squalling infant, ridiculously early, and growing from there the slow way—the way Gaian life would.

It was that and several other precocious traits that alarmed Garland to the notion that the little defect

could be blessed with a soul of his own, something no Genome before could *naturally* claim.
Garland had then decided to nurture the miracle instead of discard it. He took the child under his wing, raising and teaching him everything the hoary man thought was vital to the boy's future mission.

However, Garland was an overseer, not a babysitter. He didn't know what to expect from a four-year-old, but an attention span greater than ten seconds would have been a start.

"*Zitan!*" he barked, reverting to the child's native language to call him off his distraction.

Zitan clawed the disk to a halt, nearly slipping off its tin enamel and into the crook of a ribcage, one large enough for even the imposing Garland to lay comfortably inside. "*Wha?*"

"*Did you understand any of what I just said?*" Garland fumed from across the room of cushy, bloated, steaming corpses, looking like the tour guide to a museum of morbid abstract art. "*Were you even listening?*"

"*Yeah, yeah, something about Gaia and souls,*" Zitan responded impertinently, flicking a tuft of overgrown, sunny blonde hair out of his eyes.

"You are not concentrating on your lesson. You're playing around again."

"I heard what you said!" Zitan impetuously insisted, shifting his weight to sit on the rusty toadstool's edge, his white boots dangling over a pit of skeletal brambles.

"Then repeat it. In Gaian."

"Uh, well, um…" Zitan puttered.

"That's what I thought. You heard, but did not listen. You're never going to learn to speak Gaian if you play around all day."

"But this is so boring!" the child protested, emphatically slapping the bloody chrome between his ankles. *'You're all boring. Nobody ever wants to play.'* Zitan paddled one twig-like arm through the air melodramatically. *"You all just walk around and talk about, 'bout boring experiments and boring Gaia and boring Terra and the weather and blah blah blah. Everybody in Bran Bal is even twice as times as boring as you, Master Garland. I don't see why I have to learn how to talk like the Gaians anyway. I'm never gonna meet one."* He finished his speech by crossing his arms and legs and turning up a pouting lip.

“You never know whom you are going to meet. That is why these lessons are important. ‘Know thy enemy,’ *they say.”*

“Huh?”

“Exactly.”

“But Master Gaaaarland,” Zitan drawled a whine, *“What difference does it make to learn how to talk to the Gaians if we’re just gonna blow them all up?”*

Garland scowled. *“Ignorant questions like that only prove to me that you haven’t been listening.”* He then sighed, resigned to the maxim that you can lead a beast to water, but cannot make him drink. *“Fine, if you’re going to be like this, go. We’re finished for today.”* He waved Zitan away with a broad sweep of his cloak and turned back to the globe.

Zitan pounced on the dismissal without an ounce of guilt. *“Yay.”* He frolicked away through the deathblossoms.

Once the child was out of earshot, Garland ruminated out loud, *“He’s getting that rebellious streak, just like his predecessor. I don’t like it.”*

A few steps below, a small, thin man stood at blank-slate attention, staring listlessly ahead in the observatory's direction. Garland frowned down at his personal assistant, an elder Genome his creator had decided to name Matov. Although a youthful twenty-five years in fact and facade, Matov's hair and fur were slate grey and turning white, a sign that he was approaching the end of his prefabricated lifespan.

"Matov."
At his name, the servant robotically turned empty eyes up to his master.
"Make a note. I am beginning to suspect that, the more powerful the soul, the more…" Garland's countenance puckered as he fished for the right word. *"…individualistic the vessel becomes."*

Matov dully nodded and his master continued.

"He has a very powerful soul… but if I cannot tame it, I'll just have another Kuja." Garland folded his arms behind his back and cast a forlorn look through the globe and into nothing, for a second looking as lost in thought as one of his servants.

"He is right about one thing, though: you're all completely devoid of personality. You live, and breathe, and absorb knowledge… and have not a

single independent thought or opinion of your own. I have been here many, many years—centuries, actually—and you have no idea how I have longed for an intelligent conversation. You are lucky; you don't have to have a single idea or give any input—you just do whatever I say."

He shot his conversational sounding board a testing glance. *"…What do you think, Matov?"*

Matov blinked. *"Whatever you say, Master Garland."*

Garland smirked, disappointed as expected. *"I rest my case. And how ironic."* He lifted his arms in an open shrug. *"I am at last granted two Genomes capable of thinking for themselves…"* His hands then dropped lifelessly to his sides with an exasperated clap. *"…and they won't listen to a word I say."*

He sighed again. *"What am I doing to do with them, Matov?"*

The Genome automatically responded, *"Whatever you say, Master Garland."*

"…Indeed."

Zitan took the winding path back to Bran Bal. The village was never dark with night or light with day, but blue with mediocrity, everything from the water, to the sidewalks, to the treetops lit with translucent sapphire. It bred a lively quiet, its meandering inhabitants the only splashes of warm color, like goldfish languidly swimming in circles within a tank.

The small child shuffled into a storeroom, reached into a jar and snatched a piece of fruit from beneath the unflinching nose of the storekeeper, never knowing if she cared about the loss or not. He retreated to the commons, took his prize up a flight of stairs to the peak of the village, and settled upon the stair rail that sloped down and away from the front gates.

Zitan enjoyed his lunch as he idly looked out across the crystalline landscape. Somewhere between the boiling pink clouds and the nail-heads of giant, stalky, blue trees, a moving shape appeared on the horizon, catching the boy’s eye. At first he froze, focusing on the faraway flicker and assuring himself that he did see something, after all. The child then tossed the remains of his fruit aside and stood tall on the rail, striving for a better look.

It was large—very large—large enough to put down in the village and cover every inch of ground, and no more. It was streamlined and finned like a tropical fish or a very colorful whale, spots of red, yellow and violet punctuating its coral blue flanks. It swam through the air like a brick, stiffly and with broad, invisible strokes. The floating beast emitted a low, loud hum that carried through the air like distant thunder.

Zitan wondered, was this… an airship? Garland had told him about machines as big as houses that fly through the sky, but the boy had never seen one for himself. As he watched and marveled, the object zoomed in closer before settling down behind a hill. Zitan slid down the rail and hurried towards the sighting, eager to investigate for himself.

The landing site was far from Bran Bal's outskirts and would take several minutes to reach on foot, but Zitan knew the grounds and could surely get there before any of the other villagers even noticed his absence (he didn't suppose they'd care if he were gone—he didn't know if they cared about *anything*, but a pesky one or two might inform Garland that he was breaking the rules by straying from the village again. Heavens forbid Matov find out; the last

spanking from him would still smart if Zitan dared dwell on it.)

His tiny shape ducked and wound through stalagmites that reached out of the earth and crawled over the narrow trail like gnarled glass fingers (the open, better-trodden routes were plagued with monsters that taught little Zitan better than to cross their path.) He passed over an icy-still pond along a fallen tree and hit the main road just in time to meet a man coming the opposite way.

Both stopped short at the sight of the other, the boy extremely wary and the man practically unreadable.

He was tall, slender and pale—a little more so than for any Genome Zitan had ever seen. His creamy gold hair was combed into long, silky layers and plumed with a handful of snowy feathers. His face bore thin, delicate features that were shaded with faint brushstrokes. His clothing was foreign and carefully arranged about him, all lace, silver bands and airy sleeves over black leather belts and pointy boots.

While Zitan looked the newcomer over, the child was likewise subjected to an appraisal. The man saw immediately that this one was a bite-sized sample of

all the others: slight-statured, fair skin, full blonde hair, clear blue eyes over a button nose, and a twitching cat's tail. The boy was dressed in Bran Bal's standard fare: a flatly colored vest and sash (Zitan's hue of choice was faded red) upon a white shirt, pants and boots, all from coarse, light, plain cloth. On a chain around his neck was a thin, metallic ID tag.

There was something different, however—something about the child's manner that the man didn't fail to notice, having met and known too many Genomes to miss it. On the boy's round, impish face was a wary leer, and his stance was the very picture of apprehensive curiosity. It was rather… un-Genome-like.

"So," the man was the first to speak, "It is true. You must be the foul little urchin Garland intends to replace me with."

Zitan, taken aback by the use of Gaian, suddenly had a new set of suspicions about the arrival. "*Who are you?*"

"*I came to visit you, little one,*" he answered in lucid Terran. His voice was high-class and bittersweet, like wine. "*Tell me, what is your name?*"

The child's piercing gaze only narrowed further. *"How could you come to visit me if you don't even know my name?"*

"You're a sharp little thorn. You won't tell me your name?"

Zitan's mouth opened hesitantly and then snapped shut, considering the other's motives. At length he responded, "*My name is Zitan. Who are you?"*

"I'm a friend of Garland's."

At this, Zitan alarmedly retreated a step.

"Ahaha." The man chuckled softly into his hand. 'I see you're as fond of Garland as I am.' He cast an intrigued look upon the boy. "*Zitan… hmm. Zitan, do you know how to say your name in Gaian? Did Garland teach you how?"*

The trivia question lulled his sense of danger as the boy rolled a glance skyward, thinking. "*Um… It's, uh…"* When the answer didn't come off the top of his head, he glanced to his tag, flipping it over to read. 'Zidane.' He dropped the tag and nodded assurance. "*Yeah, that's it. I only know a little Gaian, though. Where did you come from? Are you a Gaian?"*

“Tsh, no, of course not. How could a Gaian speak Terran as fluently as I? I was born here as you were.”

“But you look funny…”

The man shrugged. *“Everyone is unique.”*

“Nah-uh.” Zitan shook his head. *“Everybody in Bran Bal is the same. Nobody ever wants to play or have any fun.”*

When the man grinned, his visage reminded Zitan of something sinister, like a spider splayed across its web. *“Well, I will play with you. How does that sound? My name is Kuja. Surely Garland told you about me?”*

Zitan mutely indicated that he had never heard of the stranger. Kuja’s smile faded, as with a twinge. *“I see. Well, rest assured, you won’t soon forget me.”* He reached into a pocket inside his vest, withdrew a small paper box and crouched to the child’s level. He held out the box like a treat to a dog. *“Come here, boy; I have a present for you.”*

Zitan shuffled one step closer, curiosity beginning to override suspicion. *“What is it?”*

“It’s a surprise. You have to come and get it.”

Zitan hesitated, considered the man, considered the unknown, and then with open fascination walked up and surrendered to the offer. He took the fragile box from Kuja and cracked it open at the man's urging. Within a nest of wax paper, he found a dense, mushy, solid brown lump, odorless but nevertheless resembling a cube of— *"Poop?"*

Kuja's expression dropped, completely nonplussed by the response. *"What?"* He then laughed flatly. *"Haha, no. It's a chocolate, a Gaian delicacy. Go on, eat it. It's very sweet."*

Zitan took the candy and gently rolled it between his hands, inspecting it. *"This is food?"* he asked, incredulous.

Kuja nodded. *"It tastes good."*

"You got this from Gaia?"

"Of course. I do a lot of work for Garland on Gaia. Now go on, tell me how it tastes."

As the man insisted, Zitan nibbled off a corner of the chocolate and, when it didn't immediately offend his senses, popped the whole thing into his mouth. *"Mmm…"* he commented while chewing, *"It's weird."*

“Do you like it?”

Zitan swallowed, thought about it for a moment and nodded eagerly, almost expecting more.

“Haha. That’s good. That’s good…” the blurring image of Kuja said. His voice became a dulcet warble as the world warped and darkened around the boy.
The change in perception was strange and frightening, though Zitan was suddenly too tired to fight it. *“Um…”* he feebly tried to complain while the ground rose up to meet him. The last thing his consciousness registered was a set of arms wrapping around him, holding him and then…

…It was very quiet, still and black.

Something very not quiet dragged him out of slumber. It was like the chorus of a hundred angry monsters. Zitan moaned and stretched drowsily over his makeshift bed, which felt hard, rough and scratchy. When he opened his eyes he was staring into a dark patchwork ceiling—large, knotted strands of fuzzy green on dull grit, tangling together and climbing higher and higher into pitch nothing.

Trying to collect his bearings, he noticed first that he was actually on the ground, and once he sat up and looked towards the only light source he fast realized that the noise bombarding the room *was* the chorus of a hundred angry monsters—or about a dozen, actually—scratching, grating and snarling within cubbies along the thick wicker wall. Zitan recognized the glowing emerald beams stringed across the mouths of the cages as the same techno-magic that locked doors in Pandemonium. He felt vaguely reassured that the beasts behind the lasers were thus contained.

It was a colorful lot, loud, lively and ferocious, not especially like any monsters he had known around Bran Bal. Two giant creatures kept the largest holes for themselves: one a feathered tank with four pale, taloned feet, a curved beak and wings that would beat and flutter witlessly against the close walls; the other a behooved, tough-skinned groundling with a razorback mane and mammoth tusks jutting forward around its squished face and beady black eyes. Both screeched and bellowed as they pawed at the splintery earth and rammed their shoulders against their enclosures.

Other smaller, stouter creatures were no less vociferous. A black wolf snapped at Zitan from

behind the bars. A short, wiry humanoid with a large nose and pointed flaps for ears threw its hands forward again and again, a feeble magic spell bouncing ineffectively off its cage's interior. A fluffy little ram was plowing the sandy ground at the foot of its door with its tiny hooves and large, curly horns. When Zitan looked closely he saw a crude tunnel peeking beneath the frame of its cage.

"Ah, so you've awoken."

Zitan started, bolting to his feet. Kuja strode into the room, a pleased smirk on his face. The boy shot wild, disoriented looks between the elegant man and the barking, wailing monsters.

"I see you're admiring my collection. They seem especially excited to see you." Kuja gestured to the caged beasts with a graceful sweep of his arm. *"As you can see, I have monsters from all over Gaia. I conduct experiments on them, just like Garland conducts experiments on those pathetic dolls in Bran Bal."*

Zitan stood ready, lost, and somehow afraid of this strange man who must have taken him to this dreadful place. *"W-what is this? Where are we?"*

"This is my special tree house. It's a laboratory of sorts."

"How did I get here? What's going on?"

Kuja smoothly approached the boy. Zitan, not knowing better whether or where to run, allowed one of Kuja's large, milky hands to guide him across the room, away from the growling cacophony and towards an open balcony. *"Now, now. Let me explain, little Zitan."*

They approached the edge, where the wall was torn away and a vast, midnight landscape poured into the horizon. They were high up, he could sense, though Zitan was more entranced by the night setting, something he had never seen in full bloom before. A red and blue moon and an ocean of stars were bright and sparkling over a black, mushy unknown, which at length gave out to the shimmering, flat, obsidian unknown, stretching far and wide to meet the heavens half-way. It was dark, mysterious and wondrous.

As Zitan drank in the awesome vista, the man beside him began to talk. *"Garland sent me here years ago to wreak havoc on Gaia—to create war, chaos, death…"* Kuja trailed off, and when he picked up again something in his tone was fierce and

bitter. *“I have hardly begun to show that withered old man my strength, and already he creates you to replace me!”*

Zitan blinked. Replace? What? He glanced up at the tall, brooding man. The cages’ green glow painted his back and the fringes of his voluminous sleeves neon while his face was masked in ominous shadow. “Well.” He turned a half-dark look upon the boy, and Zitan got his second idea to run, but he was not sure from what, whom or why. He stood still, anticipating the man’s next words, which would perhaps take again that pleasant pitch Zitan was first introduced to.

They didn’t, unfortunately. *“We shall see who is victorious over Gaia, and then…”* Before Zitan could work on the notion to flee Kuja had scooped the child up in both arms. He chortled darkly under his breath and, strangely, reverted to Gaian speak. “And then we shall see who is master over *both* worlds, and I’ll give you a hint, little Zidane: it will never be you.”

Kuja stretched out his arms, holding Zitan over the ledge. When the boy glimpsed the empty floor below he understood, finally, that he was in danger. If Kuja were to let go, Zitan felt like he would fall

forever. He began to kick and wiggle in the stronger man's grip. *"Ah, ah…! What are you doing!"*

As much as he clawed at the man's long arms, they wouldn't budge, nor would the little boy's thrashing feet make a dent, even when they did reach something to kick. Kuja would only smile patronizingly and continue in Gaian, that rich sweetness back in his voice a little too late.

"Think of this as your poetic demise. You're going to become a sacrifice to the mother of all trees, the Iifa."

While the man rambled, Zitan caught a silhouette moving in the background against the magic drapery. He peered over Kuja's shoulders to espy that ball of fluff, the ram, roaming about freely, to the envious roars of the other animals. A quick glance to the burrow it had dug answered its method of escape. The ball of wool staggered in circles for a moment before bleating loudly, a luminous seal humming at its feet.

It was casting a spell—it was casting a spell! What kind of spell? Zitan couldn't see any effect.

"She will liberate your soul from this mortal coil. It will be beautiful—one of Garland's precious

creations destroying the other. Ah, hahaha!" Kuja threw his head back to laugh, but the villainous uproar quickly died down. The man stared past Zitan with a vexed squint at something the boy couldn't twist around to see for himself.

"What is that?" Kuja murmured. 'It's… "His eyes widened with alarm." What! Who?'
He spun around, in search of an alleged culprit. Zitan was thrown to his knees, thankfully on solid ground again, though his captor still clutched his collar with one firm hand. As Kuja scanned the premises Zitan caught a glimpse of what was the matter: sailing through the night sky with distressingly approaching velocity was a large fiery ball, like a falling star. Both Terrans abruptly looked to the loose monster as it hiccupped a defiant, "yaa-a-a-a-a-a-n," at its captor.

Then everything exploded. Comet tore the tree house apart in a shower of splendid brimstone. The ground was ripped out from under Zitan's feet with a hot, white flash, and then he was falling, falling, falling into dizzy darkness. He skidded haplessly down a mountainside of prickly twigs and twined, leafy arms before his head collided with something very hard and steadfast, mercifully blacking the fast world out.

Eternity passed in a blink.

Things he knew—things he wanted—things he remembered became fleeting things, like flaming leaves in the wind. When he'd jump and reach for them they flickered and danced out of his grasp before snuffing out and slipping through his fingers like ash. There was man with a hard face in a black cloak, a man with a soft face in white satin, fuzzy, fading people gathered still around a still pond and speaking with still lips, tall trees that stood straight and proper, monsters that bit instead of barked, a house that could fly—they were swept away from him, each and every one, one by one, until there was a single lick of flame left…

"ya-a-a-an."

…a blue light…

"ya-a-a-a-an."

Reality was one sweeping, painful blur. He was like a newborn child, freshly delivered into an alien world he had no name for, and armed without words to even describe it. He had only base thoughts and heightened senses to work with.

His first thought was that he had a screaming headache. His brain was swimming in his throbbing skull, and his body arched wretchedly as he clutched his scalp and rawred an unintelligible complaint.

“ya-a-a-an.”

He snapped open his eyes, suddenly aware of another voice. The scenery was a bright and twisted mess with an impenetrable white haze for a sky. Gentle rustles and gurgles hid within a locked mesh of vines and limbs that crawled all over the clouds in a lazy swarm.

However, he was only immediately concerned with the closest moving object, standing right in his face. It was a squat cotton ball upon four peg legs, its two thick, blunt horns curling around its pug face and under its nubbly ears. It smelled like bad gas and sweaty fur.

And it was eating his hair.

“Ah, AH, Ahh…!” When he scrambled upright the pint-sized ram tore a clump of leaves free from his blonde mop. It chewed on them obliviously while he indulged in panic.

Where he was, who he was, why he was—? He knew nothing. He shuffled about on his hands and

feet, trying desperately to orient himself and learn again what he didn't remember knowing.

Everything was wet. The air was heavy and warm. The ground was soft, damp, pale sand. Sprinkled over the sand were lumps of clay and stone. Around the stones sprung lush ferns and creeping beds of vines. The vines took purchase along the trunks of great, mossy logs that were stacked far and tall upon one another, their inexhaustible, infinitely branching ends disappearing into the mist. Distant barks and cackles called up other growls and whispers, all carried through brambles thin and thick, large and small on the sighing of the earth.

The ram munched obliviously on leaves.

He blinked at the creature. It returned his open gawking with a half-lidded stare. It then swallowed its vegetables and bleated at him lackadaisically.

"ya-a-a-a-a-a-an."

"Yaaaaaan…?" he tested his voice, mimicking the beast.

"ya-a-a-a-a-a-a-an," it returned, as if correcting him.

“Yaaaaaaaaaan,” he tried again, stronger.

“ya-a-an,” it said.

“Yan!” he proclaimed with the thrill of communicating with another living being. His mind assigned “Yan” to the creature, and there was his first friend by name.

He waved and beat the ground invitingly. Yan plodded up to him and sniffed his outstretched hands. He began to inspect his new friend closely, exploring Yan’s mire of wooly hair and tracing its sturdy horns with his fingers. For all appearances Yan didn’t mind the petting, except to sneeze heavily on him. The boy grimaced and wiped his snotty arm across the ground, which seemed only to coat his sticky sleeve with clumps of sand. He pouted at the mess for a moment before shrugging it off and standing up.

He looked around at the encompassing jungle. There was a whole wide world to explore, now. He arbitrarily picked a direction and started walking.

Yan followed him.

The world, he learned, was a curious place.

Nothing seemed to know where it was going. Trees broke the earth, set in one direction, and then would deviate from their sky-bound course and tie themselves in knots with their neighbors. Ants took convoluted routes across the flat sand. Lichens bred where nobody else was wanted. Fish cut across ponds, doubled back, and then veered away to some random shore. Wind would flippantly detach from its plans and start anew at a different vector.

In all the chaos, everything seemed to function on opposites.

There was the bright time, when the land was lit with dull, ambient light diffused through the white mist, and this was forever preceded and followed by the dark time, when the omnipresent mist was set aglow with the deepest indigo, and no corner was spared black shade.
The critters of the bright time were not the same as those of the dark. The former were large, garishly hued and loud. They stomped, chirped and screamed through the realm, declaring their presence wherever they went. The latter were like the shadows: lithe, silent and always creeping as if to not get caught.

His ever-unoccupied mind took up the ponderous and time-consuming job of mentally sorting his

discoveries.

Plants were green and did not move; animals were not green and moved. Except when they weren't. Or when they did.
Dead plants were brown, and dead animals did not move.
Some animals ate plants, and some ate other animals.
Green plants tasted worse than the non-green plants, except the green pods with the black spots, which were bitter in a good way.
Everything that did not move, was not green and was not once a plant or an animal was not a critter, except water which was not alive but moved and animals ate it like they did the plants but…

He eventually screwed the whole game in favor of the obvious. There were only three categories he needed to be concerned with:
things he could eat
things he couldn't eat
and things that could eat *him*.

Though he picked up the delicate art of survival eventually, via "trial and error," many things he learned by Yan's example, especially which grubs made the best snacks and which beds stayed well

from belligerents. He didn’t always agree with Yan about the tasty things, however. It took many trials and upset stomachs to determine which things were good for Yan and not good for him to eat, though they did reach consensuses about certain things, like the juicy fruits borne on tall trees. Yan would sniff out the fallen, rotten fruit at the base of its special tree, and from there the boy would scale the slender, ridged trunk to claim fresh, ripe goodies for them both.

He grew accustomed to the pervasive humidity, and indulged in baths whenever he encountered a pond or clear stream. Learning to swim followed naturally. The water was sometimes brackish, often crisp and always cold, which was a boon on especially sweltering days. He could never seem to convince Yan of the benefits; no matter how he pushed and shoved, the ram wouldn’t get more than its hooves wet.

Water was also the source of one of his favorite discoveries, next to the yellow flowers that tasted honey-sweet: his reflection. When he first glimpsed another creature like him in the depths of a puddle, he was amazed and confounded, for every time he poked his hand through the surface, he would receive only muddy fingernails and a shattered

image. It took several false swipes to grasp that he was merely observing himself.

He gazed into such mirrors and would wonder why he never saw any flora or fauna that quite resembled himself. Then again, he never saw another Yan, so at least they were unique together.

He'd spend idle hours scrutinizing his features, measuring them against those of other beasts.
He had sandy blonde hair, but only on his head and tail, the latter of which was as strong as an arm, if more pliable. He found that he could pick up stray objects with his tail as well as swing from trees by it, which saved him a few high-climbing, nasty accidents.
He had another set of fur that was soft, loose and light, yet not fuzzy, and he could not only shed it at will but put it back on whenever he felt the need, though it was difficult to keep it clean and dry all the time.
He had long, skinny, awkward limbs with elbows and knees in the wrong places, so he couldn't handily walk on all paws, hooves, feet… whatever, like Yan did. He could walk better upright on his hind limbs, somewhat like the birds, although he couldn't fly with his arms like they did (and he did try, with disastrous results for both his ankles and

the shrub that broke his fall).
He was envious of the flying things that reached higher, the quadrupeds that could cover ground more swiftly, and the fish that could swim better than he. One thing he could boast over Yan and everything else, however, was his ability to scale any and every tree that crossed his path, and after playing in the branches for days on end he actually became more adept at traversing the jungle by limb and vine than by ground.

The only item about him that he could never figure the use for was a flat, stiff, shiny grey leaf that was always around his neck on a duly shiny, tough-as-spider's-thread string. The notion to discard the useless flake never crossed his mind. It was his rock leaf, something special that belonged to only him, and sometimes he would stare, boggled, at its intricate, minute scribbles. Much like himself, he never met its duplicate.

When he and Yan were not scavenging for food, playing around, bathing in a stream or dozing someplace dry and comfortable, the boy was out hunting for the next great, new thing, pressing the boundaries of his known domain.

One day he followed the gentle uphill ramp of a tree until he cleared the fog, and that garnered his first glimpse of the world at large. When put into scope from that vantage point, the aimless jungle actually seemed to have a method to its madness, all the snaking trees converging at a hub to form one, massive, dome-topped tree. It was easily the largest, tallest thing he had ever seen, clearing the clouds that flew high above the foggy basin. Not even the birds he watched would attempt its impossibly lofty summit.

The next day he decided to climb it.
It was a terribly slow expedition that not even Yan would accompany, and that beastie followed him everywhere. Whenever he'd convinced himself that he had made real progress, he needed only to step back a bit and peek upwards to stand disappointed. After spending over half the bright time trying to negotiate higher and higher routes, he lost the drive to reach the top and stopped to rest in an open cave.
He would remember that niche for its rough, crumbling, coal texture and the bright green shoots that sprang from the powdery grey sand. He'd never forget the most beautiful sunset he ever saw, either, while sitting over that precipice on the giant tree.

When looking out over the land from such great altitudes he discovered that there was much more world out there than his jungle. He once thought the jungle *was* the entire world, but the giant tree showed him that it not only had an end, but things still more vast beyond it.

On the way down he vowed to go and see all of it up close—the mountains, the great expanse of water that could swallow the sky and the wide, treeless plains that rose up out of it. He would go to all those places and know the entire world and all the critters in it. He would sit on the edge of the world, where the land and water stopped, and look out at the endless sky.

And Yan would be by his side when he did it.

The quarry hit the ground running, a spray of mulch churning up around its skidding paws. It galloped through the choking woods as a sleek, smoky blur.

He pursued it along the low looping, kissing branches, bouncing from one foothold to the next inviting limb like a squirrel on a mission. The prey was swift, bounding through the thorny bushes

without a catch and ducking around trees without missing a beat, but he was likewise swift and as agile in the trees as it was on the ground.

It was a critter he'd never met before, nearly twice his size. It had a powerful torso that propelled its lean legs with uncanny speed and grace over the twisted terrain. Its muzzle was long, pointed, and equipped with pearly fangs. It's red eyes were deep-set and faced forward, always keenly locked on its target. It had misty black fur, a sweeping, fuzzy tail and a mane of bushy tentacles that flowed down its neck.

When it pounced on his evening bed and tried to attack Yan, he became absolutely incensed and chased it off.

He wasn't going to be satisfied with merely driving it away, though. It was fast, strong, soft and ferociously beautiful. He had never seen anything quite like it and would likely never encounter so rare a monster again.

And he was going to eat it.

The critter sharply turned at the steep bank of a creek and ran alongside it. The boy leapt off a sturdy bough and caught a cluttered branch that dipped low

with his weight. Its elastics pulled him back up and he flew off the swing, sailing into his prey's path and landing on all fours to block its charge. The critter started to double back the other way, but it stumbled over the flimsy leaf bed and fell on its shoulder.

By the time it got up again he was upon it, latching onto its back and wrestling it back to the ground. It growled and snapped in its frenzy to get the upper hand while both rolled over the twig-strewn earth. The stronger critter was at last on top, bearing its grizzly maw down on the floored boy. He dug a foot under its chin and held off its jaws with his hands while his other foot frantically beat its chest, to no avail. The critter pressed down harder, trying to wrap its teeth around the child's neck, its seething drool freckling his shirt with hot, damp spots.

His palms were starting to bleed from where the critter's jagged canines bit into them. He gritted his teeth, wrapped his legs around the beast's shoulders, and with a determined shove twisted aside and drove its snout into the dirt, the critter's fangs just barely scraping his right ear. He followed through the quick maneuver to swing up and around, mounting its back.

It snorted, staggered around and began to buck and thrash violently in its efforts to throw him off. He clung tenaciously to its thick fur, so that when the beast pitched forward the boy still clung to its ears even as he flipped over its head, dragging both to the ground. He rolled to sit on its face and brought his heel down hard on one of its eyes, drawing out a piercing yelp. Its whole body kicked like a fish, tossing him onto his back. When the fangs came at him again he had them in a lock, his hands tight around his muzzle while a foot propped its mouth wide open. This time, with the upper hand… or foot, rather, the boy jumped back onto the critter's face, throwing his weight down his leg and snapping its bottom jaw with a satisfying crack and a blood-curdling howl.

The hunt was pretty much over at that point. The critter contorted miserably over the ground, blood pouring from its broken mouth and dyeing the brown leaves crimson once more. During the distraction the boy found a heavy, dead limb and clubbed the screaming thing on the skull over and over until it stopped moving and he couldn't find its eyes in the red, black and grey pulp anymore.

The job done, he stepped back, let the bludgeon slip through his fingers and surveyed the scene while

catching his breath. His hands and feet stung with puncture wounds and he wouldn't be able to climb, much less walk very well for a few days, but at least supper was served.

He yelled for Yan. "YaaaaaaAAAaaaaan!"

"ya-a-a-a-n," sounded from afar.

Yan appeared after a few more nagging calls, trotting up to the slaughter and sniffing the critter's corpse inquisitively. He left Yan to guard the kill while he went back to their bed to fetch a griffin talon, one he'd salvaged by chance several moons ago. He returned with it and set to work, carving open the critter's abdomen and meddling with parts both tasty and not.

The two ate with messy, raw abandon until the boy couldn't tell whose blood he was licking off his fingers and he was too full to care. Once stuffed, both took a quick bath in the nearby creek (he threw Yan in, damned if it liked it or not; the last time they went to bed with fresh blood on them they were mistaken for a ripe carcass, themselves, and it was a hell of a night from there) and fled into the underbrush, leaving the remains for bigger, meaner scavengers.

He found their bed again, a mound of dry leaves, and burrowed into it, ready to snooze. Yan snuggled under the leaves beside him just as the last of the bright time was slinking away. Between the bug-ridden leaves, Yan's woolen coat and the boy's layered garments, he kept warm for the long, chilly night, his dreams lingering on the scent of wet hair and stale earth.

It was his second cold time. Times liked to change—light to dark, hot to cold, living to dead and everything back again. Though the seasons weren't the only things to change (he'd wonder more and more after every bath why his clothes were shrinking), they were the most significant turn in his existence.

Unlike light and dark times, the cold time was a achingly subtle change, creeping over the land by inches every day. It was like a sunset one didn't pay notice to until the thick of night was already at hand. While it was refreshing at first to leave behind the cooking heat, the temperature continued to drop below cozy until it became nearly unbearable to go without his clothes and a warm, fuzzy body next to him.

He learned how to tell the coming of the cold time, aside from the obvious. Green things turned brown, shriveled up and fell to crispy pieces, and his walks became loudly crunchy. The air sounded hollow and the wind howled like wolves at night. The tiniest critters were gradually less prolific and then gone altogether. Flowers and fruits vanished as well—the food supply dwindled in general. To survive he and Yan had to rely less on sweet tasties and grubs and more on meat, which was not only sour but took more energy to acquire and involved perilous competition with other carnivores. The only benefit was that one good kill could settle their stomachs for days at a time, whereas fruits and berries required constant scavenging.

For every jungle he visited it was the very same. No realm escaped the cold time.

He'd made as good on his vow to see the world as he could, but it turned out to be even bigger than he remembered from his outlook in the canopy of the great tree. It was as true as he had overseen, however, that his home jungle was the only place haunted by a perpetual fog; the rest of the land was clear and breezy of air.

He had wandered to one edge of the jungle, where it fell over a rocky, imposing cliff into swelling, charging, treacherous water that seemed to have no end. He then walked to the other end of the jungle and met a wall of roots and clay that was somewhat more surmountable. After climbing out of the misty jungle basin, he had a dusty, grassy, empty plain sprawling out ahead of him. It took a couple of days to cross, which nearly ran him to death since there was not a drop of water or shade and only Yan's favorite herbs around. Though jealous of the ram's favorable conditions, he could never entertain the idea to make rations out of his plump, lazy friend —Yan was more hair and horn than meat, anyway.

It was a relief to encounter another forest at the base of an imposing mountain range. They rested and played for aimless weeks before attempting to find the top of the mountains and the end of the world.

They took the slow, easy, roundabout trails, stopping for novelties like giant, rotund green men with clubs the size of trees, wispy little pixies that could skip across ponds, and waterfalls with the voice of five rainstorms at once. Yan regarded each find with the same impassive demeanor it'd bestow to a clump of

weeds, so the boy had to be excited for two to pick up the slack.

He was both unimaginably disheartened and intrigued to see that, once they finally hit a summit, there was not only the *other* half of the mountains to climb down but much, much more ahead and beyond them—more plains, more forests, more hills, canyons, beaches, plateaus and caves. There was almost too much world for one little boy and Yan to handle.

“Yaaaaan,” he’d lamented, in awe of the vista.
“ya-a-an,” Yan said.

He was less enthusiastic about exploration since then, minding only the simple pleasures and basic survival. He wasn’t even sure if there *was* an end of the world anymore, or if it just tumbled on forever. What he was sure of was that, no matter how many new things and places he found, and no matter how the times changed, they would always change back. His life always seemed to be the same.

It was pretty good.

Warm time was coming back. The barren, prickly trees and shrubs erupted in bright, soft verdure and gentle blossoms, only a fraction of which tasted any good, though the returning swarms of flies, birds and bees would argue different. Soon enough the good, pulpy roots and fresh fruits would return, which both boy and Yan eagerly anticipated.

One day he was taking a swim in a sheltered spring off the mountain path. Yan had found a patch of flowers earlier and he had left the ram to it, taking time alone for his bath. The midday sun was shooting golden darts through the cove's lush, still canopy. He was actually wondering after the silence in the typically vivacious forest while he crawled up onto a rock to dry off.

He must have dozed off, because he was waking up to the strangest animal call to date. It was faint, not yet nearby, but approaching. He rolled to his hands and feet and perked up his hearing, straining to pick up the oddly melodic sound.

"…la, la…"

He wrinkled his nose and cocked his head to one side, bemused. What was making that noise? It was high and light like a pixie's giggle, yet soft and

rhythmic like a hooting owl… but not quite either, really.

"…la la-la, la…"

He scooted off the rock and into his pants and vest. He then jogged around the skirt of the spring towards the encroaching voice, keeping cover around the palm bushes and ferns. He ducked under a wide-brimmed leaf just as the singing creature approached the spring.

His breath froze in his lungs. The critter was not exactly a critter. It—she was almost exactly his size and shape, with smooth skin and dark hair and eyes. She wore a simple white dress with sharp, sea blue, radial embroidery on the front, like a giant flower squished flat onto the cloth. He didn't see a tail, though at the top of her forehead a pearly horn daintily peeked through her bangs.

She spun a glance around the cove, perhaps checking for monsters. She then walked onto a flat rock outcropping, knelt over the water and drew a—what was that, a hollowed-out, bottle-necked gourd?—through it, pulling up a full load. He watched her with steady fascination while she sang the entire time.

"…la, la la la, la la-la la"

It was… she was… someone like him—someone like him! In the whole wide world, with monsters and plains, there was such a thing, after all. She stood and turned, as if to leave. He panicked—she was going to get away! What if he never saw her again?

That was his only thread of forethought as he burst from the bushes to meet her. Startled, she shrieked a note and fumbled with her jar of water, which nearly slipped loose and crashed into pieces. She was then very still and quiet, gawking at the boy on the opposite bank. He read a little fear and wonder in her mien, so she must have been as surprised to see him as he was to see her.

He stood and returned her stare, all at once deaf and dumb. The season could have turned again and neither would have made the first move.

And intervening call finally broke their wary trance. "Sarah!"

The girl snapped her gaze away from him to glance back at the obscure voice. "Huh?" she returned.

“Sarah, hurry with that water!” ordered the distant shrubbery. The tone was trumpeting, a little deeper and not as squeaky as the girl’s. “We’ve got to get back on the road!”

“Um.” The girl tossed him a hesitant look, and then glanced back towards the voice. “Coming, mommy!” She retreated towards that motherly hail, one eye lingering on him as she left.

He stupidly remained glued to his spot until the footsteps of the passers-by had faded away down the mountain. Many blinks later, he emerged from his empty gazing and shook his head. Wow! A person! A person like him…
Well, like him, but still different. There was something very foreign about her, as if she didn’t belong in the jungle. She was very… *clean*. But still, if only Yan had seen her!

Wait, Yan?

His first move was to find Yan. The ram was grudgingly yanked from its afternoon snack and brought back to the spring. The boy stooped over the very ledge from which the girl fetched water and fished for her scent on the rocks. He then followed her tracks, which were strange, flat-bottomed prints in the dirt, not unlike those his boots would leave,

out to an open trail. There he uncovered the little boot tracks meeting a set of larger boot tracks, which both disappeared at… bird tracks. Very, very big bird tracks.

He wondered, did a griffin eat them? He'd think he would have heard a scuffle of some sort. Resolved to find out anyway, he began to follow the bird's imprints, confused moreover when he didn't see them vanish with flight. What kind of griffin was this?

It was lucky enough that their target never took off, else the boy and Yan would have had the shortest hunt ever. They tracked the prints along the mountain's major arteries, eventually straying from known territory and crossing a bridge of root-riddled bedrock to another land across a fjord.

They then had a great plain to cross, their only guideline already dissolving in the dust. By the time night had fallen the boy was wishing for a jug of water, himself, though the blood of a wandering goblin sufficed. The trackers nibbled on the wiry monster's bones and settled in for sleep under the star-speckled heavens.

They were back on track the next morning. The vestiges of bird prints led them to the crest of a gently sloping basin. What they found within was incredible.

It was… a forest of bricks? Perfectly squared blocks were stacked together and alongside one another, arrayed along a river of golden dirt. The closer he and Yan stepped towards them, the larger the blocks appeared, and the more complex the place became. Sandy, rusty and chalky adobe was built into domes that could house a zaghnol or two, each. These aboveground caves had holes punched in their sides to let through light, air, or who knew what else. Some windows sported wooden grates cut into delicate bubbles or spider web patterns. The main road and its many tributaries were decked in cloth suspended by wooden stakes, and banners and tents were of all the colors of the sunset.

He didn’t have any words for a city, but this was his first visit to one. He and Yan scurried right up to its outskirts, itching to investigate its heart. The dwellings and wood were unnaturally shaped and cut along tiers across a seaways canyon, though the most amazing and attractive feature of the grounds were its people.

The boy went from seeing his first human being (besides himself) to dozens at once, and it was thrilling. The people were of many sizes, colors, builds and garments. Most were twice as tall as he! Some had hair on their face and arms, some had no hair on their head, and some wore so many pieces of clothing that he couldn't tell either or not (he wondered how they weren't hot, walking around in the sun with so much outer fur). Some were shapely and sleek, and others big and stocky, shriveled and frail, or simply comely. Not one had a tail (or they were carefully hidden), but each had a horn atop his or her head, and all were as varied as spring blooms.

He meandered through the clamoring streets, a wide-eyed witness to late morning business. One thing he noticed right away about people was that they chattered all the time, to one another or to groups, passing by or at rest—their mouths never seemed to stop, but it filled the air with the sound of life, and he liked it, even if he didn't understand a word.

A cluttered cart rumbled over the gravel on two large wooden wheels, toted by a duly large yellow bird with long, meaty legs and stumpy wings. He was so immersed in the strange, new environment that he almost missed the chance to crouch upon the

road and study the passing bird's feet, making the correlation between the feathery beast of burden and the griffin-esque tracks. So! That must be the culprit critter.…It didn't look like it would eat people, though. If it could, it should have eaten the man on the cart that was lashing its hide with a stick.

While he was pondering the fate of the little girl a man stepped up to him, his broad frame blotting out the boy's view of the sun. "You, boy."

The boy squinted up at him, curious over the sudden attention.

"Boy, that your yan?"

What what what yan? Since the man was pointing to Yan, that must have been the object of conversation. The boy glanced around at Yan, who was huddled behind him, and then back to the man.

"Yan?" Boy spoke up.

"Yes, that yan. Is it yours?" When the child responded with a slack-jawed stare, the man shrugged, exasperated. "Look, the monster pens are in the market. Take your livestock there." The man pointed further into town and, without waiting for a response that wasn't going to come besides, strolled busily away.

Why did he point that way? Boy considered downtown for a moment before heading through the sparse crowds into it, Yan close on his heels. The farther they ventured, the more densely populated the streets seemed to be. He was soon pushing around skirts and boots to access alleys and their mysterious stores, and he quickly discovered the subject of much of the chatter.

He had never, ever, anywhere seen so much food stocked in one place. There was a trough he could lie down in that was brimming with apricots; another with mangoes, and then peaches—baskets of cherries and strawberries, peppers, spinach, carrots and seeds—another booth had critters turned inside-out and hanging out on ropes to dry—every type of tasty he had seen and hadn't, all under shady stands along the road. People were pacing from one stand to the next with baskets, picking goods, chatting with a man behind the counter and then walking away with armfuls to eat.

It was *delightful*.

"ya-a-a-an." Even Yan's mouth was watering at the sight. He couldn't keep the ram away from a booth loaded with cabbage. Boy, preferring things

that didn’t make his eyes water, selected a peach and bit into it happily.

“Hey, boy!” the person manning the respective booth accosted the lad. “Those are two gil.”

Someone else was talking to him! What a day. Boy wished he knew how to hold a conversation. He bit into his peach again.

“Hey! You gonna pay for that or what?” The man wasn’t sounding very happy. He wondered why. Boy turned and went to find Yan, who was being swatted away by a large, irate woman. Yan scampered up to its friend, a cabbage leaf still drooping from its teeth.

“Oi! Little boy, is that your yan?” the woman was suddenly pointing at *him* now, looking none the happier. What was wrong?

He didn’t get to find out before the peach man snagged him from behind by the arm, which was then twisted against his back. “Hey you! I don’t give free lunches. Where’s your mother?”

Not a word sunk in, but Boy did understand pain; it meant he was being attacked. He bet that if he let cabbage woman get to Yan, she was going to attack it, too, and that wouldn’t do. He tried to reach

around and free himself, but peach man had a solid grip on his wrist and it felt like his arm would be ripped out of its socket if he struggled the wrong way.

"I said where's your mo—"
Peach man didn't have much to say once he received a swift, hard swat to his crotch with an unexpected tail. In fact, he was impressively short of breath. Boy broke out of the man's weakened hold and bolted away to a presumably safe distance. When he looked back, peach man was just being helped to his feet by surrounding men, who began chattering and pointing in his direction.

"What? Thief?"
"Where?"
"There! That boy!"
"Stop, you little thief!"

When two more men began running towards him, he got the good idea to not let them catch up. He doubted they wanted to have a friendly conversation. "Yan!" Boy screamed after the ram, who didn't need to be told to flee from the charging, screaming fat lady with a broom in her hands.

They were both running at top notch through the congested town square, darting and shoving through

legs and their not-amused owners, the heated word, “Thief!” thrown at their backs like shuriken. They encountered an intersection with a cart slogging across. The child deftly dove under the rolling box and around its grinding wheels, Yan shortly following, its fleece nearly pinched to the pavement.

He didn’t even look back again to see if he was still being chased. He just kept running until the market was gone behind them, then the houses, and then the city and all its people.

There were some woods outside town, which he and Yan made home in. Half of the forest consisted of pine trees, which he didn’t like so much because their branches were narrow, brittle and too high off the ground to get a reaching start. He stuck to the favorite, familiar trees that grew around the local river.

Though he felt safe and cozy in the forest again, his mind never wandered too far from the place of people. He wondered how all that food grew there, much less before it was time for many of those fruits to grow. If the food didn’t grow there, he wondered how it got there. He wondered why people with

more food than they could possibly eat didn’t like to share any of it with him. He didn’t make any more trips to find out, though. It was warm time and the forest was bountiful enough to satisfy him and Yan without poking around in people town.

There were two special occasions, however, when his curiosity got the better of his apprehension, and he made expeditions back into that strange, wonderful and dangerous place.

The first occasion was the evening Boy sighted something strange at the human camp. For someone not inclined to return to a place, the child sure liked to watch it. He would occasionally step out of the woods and cast spying looks over the town from its periphery, as if one of those days it would not be there anymore.

One of many things he always wondered about the city was its lighting. When the dark time set in and the brightest objects in the world were supposed to be the moons, the people somehow had spots of orange, flickering light scattered over their land, bright as fireflies and steady as stars. He would always wonder from afar, until one evening he

checked on humanopolis and saw many more lights blazing than usual, and strange sounds. It had been a dull day and he was just a little restless and hungry, so for a change he called Yan and headed into town.

They arrived at a spectacle. Every single man, woman and child in the city must have been out and on the streets. Even if he had remembered the lay of the town from before, it was unrecognizable now, with the throng of people weaving around and through striped tents and glittering streamers. The honey glow of torchlight mingled with that of the eclipsing moons and ignited sliding sparks on jewelry that jingled around the wrists and necks and from the ears of happy, laughing people.

He stopped to join a group of flies admiring a torch. When he reached to touch it he quickly snapped back with a yelp, his hand stinging with heat. It was bright and warm! It must have been a tiny piece of the sun. The people must have stabbed the sun with that stake before it hid behind the end of the world, and brought back a shred of its flesh to light their town. How clever! They must have been terribly great hunters too, to catch up with the sun every day. He could never quite get to it.

He flitted from crate to doorway to concealing tent flap, trying to keep a low profile. He followed his nose down the road to a central meeting ground, where he pleasantly discovered tables of food and bowls filled with colored water. His stomach growled with anticipation, but he checked himself. He was not too quick to forget what had happened the last time he walked up to food in this town and ate it.

He tossed cautious looks around at the milling people while surreptitiously backing up towards the banquet tables. Once he bumped into one of the ends he ducked under the tablecloth and discovered the perfect, uninhabited crawlspace. He waved Yan in, and there the two hid out. Boy could once in a furtive while reach a hand or tail through a slit in the cloth, hook and reel in whatever tasty he could snatch.

There were chopped pieces of his favorite fruits, delicious nuts, fat lettuce leaves (he gave those to Yan), chunks of meat that were somehow brown and tough without being rotten, and sticky things in bowls that took on the flavor of dirty fur as he licked the tip of his tail clean—it was still good.

Between bites he'd peek outside at goings on. Those his size chased each other merrily around, at familiar play. He was strongly tempted to jump out and join them, but a nagging cluelessness about their game and wariness towards their reaction put him in his place. There was a man sitting on a stump, a hole-riddled reed to his mouth, and as he blew into it the grounds were filled with quick, light tunes. Across the square, people were lined up to throw balls through brightly painted hoops.

In the middle of the commons was a raised dais, its corners marked by four ornate stone torches. Gradually more people pooled around the edges of the platform, until Boy's view of it was completely obscured. The reed-man quit airing his music and an expectant hush fell over the crowd. A man then started speaking from the stage, and many stopped to listen.

"Welcome to this year's Festival of the Moons…"

"ya-a-a-an."
"Yan!" he spit reproachfully. It was hard enough to hear the man from the back of a murmuring crowd without a ram bleating in his ear.
Yan shut up.

"…Madain Sari has once again been blessed with great bounties, and every year we continue to grow and broaden our horizons. By the blessings of the Eidolons, may we see another summer as beautiful as this!"

Boy flinched and Yan jumped at the outburst as the populace enthusiastically responded, "Long live the Eidolons! Long live the grand summoners!"

The cheering faded and music started playing again, but its nature had changed. It was slower, each note taking its time to rise and fall to the beat of some drums and the tinkle of bells. Everyone was watching a performance on the platform that had been blotted out of his view. He couldn't lie in hiding anymore; he had to see what was so fascinating that it could hold the attention of over half the village.

Yan whimpered something hesitant, but eventually followed his friend out from under the tables. Boy approached the edge of the crowd and realized that he'd have to squirm his way to the front before he'd see anything besides the seats of two-dozen pants. While he plotted a way to the action his eye caught a familiar member of the audience.

She was perched on the shoulders of a broad-shouldered man and gleefully fixated on the show, but it was the very same girl he had seen at the spring, flower dress and all. He momentarily lost interest in his objective and walked around the back of the crowd to meet her. He stepped up behind the tower of man and girl, hopped in place and waved at her backside. “Yan! Yan!”

No dice. She didn’t even turn around. He then jumped and tagged the rim of her dress. “Yan!”

“Huh?” The girl twisted to look down at the boy, who waved again and smiled, bidding for her acknowledgement. Did she even remember him?

After a blank moment, her face brightened and she giggled. “Hey it’s you!”
“Hee,” he returned, glad she seemed to recognize him.

She tapped the man on his spiky-furred head. “Daddy, that’s the boy I saw on the mountain path.”

“Hmm? Who? What?” He spun around, taking another second to notice a kid at his feet. “Oh. Well, hello son. You’re a strange-looking fella. Where did you come from? Is that your yan, there?”

Again nonplussed by an articulate human, Boy blinked and gaped at him. “Uh…”

An explosive diversion thankfully saved him the trouble of answering. The stars cracked and rippled into blossoms, one screaming after the other in a different color every time, like a rainbow shower.

“Daddy daddy, fireworks!” the girl chirped and clapped, obviously happy about this.

Man, girl and just about everyone else stuck on the ground craned their necks skyward to observe the dancing firmament. Every starburst would incur a wave of awed grunts and shrieks. Boy couldn’t take his eyes off it. It was loud and terrible, as if the sky were falling to pieces, yet it was beautiful, and since no one else was running for their lives, he presumed it safe to stand and watch.

Yan didn’t share that sentiment. “ya-a-a-an!” it wailed, ready to bolt.
“yan yan yan,” Boy cooed as he bent down and patted Yan’s flanks, trying to pacify the beastie. Several eruptions later, when Yan still wasn’t mollified, he picked himself up and took the skittish ram home.

As they walked back to the woods that night, he couldn’t quit smiling.

His third and final visit to the people city was during the later half of warm time.

There was not as much to see in the town that day as much as there was to see above it. It had been a red morning and a grey afternoon, and as dark time was creeping in the sea breeze was picking up to something harsh and the dark clouds were turning black. If he couldn’t tell a storm by then, the growling cumulous and lances of white light that stitched the horizon together were good clues.

Storms weren’t comfortable things to ride out, but if he and Yan found a dry niche in the rocks or a fallen tree, they fared well enough. They had pinned down the latter and were settled in for a long, noisy night.

It turned out to be the longest, roughest storm yet. The trees bowed and lay prostrate for a mighty wind that sheared the leaves from their branches and made the whole forest sway and groan angrily. Rain forgot gravity and invaded their purportedly dry den in heaves. Since he was wet anyway, Boy crawled out

of their hole and withstood a gauntlet of slapping shrubbery and raining twigs to clear the woods and check on people town. He imagined the city handling the severe weather a little better, as there weren't trees to beat against their doorsteps.

He didn't even need the incessant lightning to spot it—no one could miss it. It wasn't just torchlight, which was commonplace; it was *fire*—lots of fire, everywhere—on rooftops, in the streets, all over houses and stores. The city was blazing.

It was incredible. He was horrified. That wasn't right—that wasn't right! That much fire shouldn't be there! It would hurt people! What about the peach man, or the cabbage woman, or that girl? Was that girl hurt?

"Yan!" he bellowed over his shoulder into the forest, though it was unnecessary. Yan was already at his side.

They raced to the inferno. He had to gallop on all fours, like he did through the trees, to keep the stiff, strong winds from kicking him off the slick ground. Fortunately, once they entered the town, the brick buildings would buffer the storm's assault.

Unfortunately, they walked out of the pummeling rain and into fiery chaos. A few people were afoot, scrambling out of homes as the roofs collapsed into cinders, clutching their precious things and one another. One of the big yellow birds sprang over a pile of flaming crates and scampered out of town into the darkness, preferring the pitch unknown to a sizzling fate. The air smelled of wet smoke and rotten things. Where was the girl? Could he find her? If he could find her, he would take her to his woods, where it was safer, and where he could protect her. He knew the woods well, but this was a brimstone riot.

He witnessed a man jumping into a cooking house after the voice of a screaming woman, but neither emerged, especially after a giant glob of flaming rock careened into the roof, crushing the dwelling. Boy shot a look to the sky, watching fireballs plummet from the heavens like hot, bright hailstones. He'd never seen a storm do *that.*

The number on the streets was dwindling fast as people either got out of dodge or got fried. Boy charged ahead, combing through roads and alleys not yet touched by the blaze, looking for one little face out of the fleeing masses. He turned at a fountain and took the river-walk down to a place

where boats were stored beneath the cliffs. It was mostly empty of vessels, though one of the remaining boats was being hastily boarded by a group of four. He ran down to check, but no, none of them were the girl. He'd searched the whole town as far as he could go, and no sign of her. With any luck, she left with the others, but he had no way to know.

The sea lurched and hissed, the city's brilliantly burning reflection like hot ashes on the face of every swelling crest. There were many floundering ships out there, bouncing up and diving behind the tall waves like dolphins.

Boy stood at the end of the dock, looking out over the tempestuous waters, exhausted and frustrated. He wanted desperately to find that girl. He wasn't even sure why, but she wasn't there, and he didn't know where to go or what to do, now. There was an explosion above as one of the fireballs collided with the stone reaching over the dock. This was followed by a groaning crack, and then all at once the ceiling crumbled and crashed at the stairwell, flooding the path with flaming debris.

He dumbly watched this, taking a shock-induced moment to understand that he and Yan were now trapped. He couldn't even hear the second crack

over the surge of panic and the melody of the storm, but he did feel the jolt as Yan head-butted him at full tilt off the dock. Boy tumbled backwards into a wooden cradle as another stony pillar broke away and smashed into the ledge he was just upon. He heard snapping wood amidst the rushing tide and rumbling rocks, though by the time he gathered his bearings he was already being carried in a rowboat out into the sea's tantrum, a rope trailing uselessly from the vessel's bow.

He looked back, searching for the ruined dock, looking for no no No NO—

"YAN!" he called, over and over, pleading with the rapidly distancing dock that Yan would somehow appear from the rubble and swim to his side again, and they would be together again always together no not Yan anything but Yan come back come back don't be like the dead things don't go—

"YAAAAAAAAAAN!" His tears stung more than the heavy rain and hotter than the torches, but he didn't quit screaming, crying for his only friend in the whole wide, scary world that seemed like it was going to swallow him. He was choking on the water that spilled into his boat and filled his lungs with every tearing breath.

The last, amazing thing he ever saw at the people city was hovering in from the clouds above it: a giant, bloodshot, slitted eye, quite possibly belonging to the biggest critter ever.

Then the sea turned inside out and devoured him.

He was amazed that he and his rickety little rowboat weren't smashed to fish food under the crushing waves. He'd spent the night clawing for life and good breath, the morning sleeping the fading storm off, and the following days drifting stupidly on the flat, wide, wide, wide… wide ocean.

He opened his eyes to a sky that was empty, save a piercingly bright orb at its apex. When he groaned and shut it out, the sun's glaring shape was still impressed on the back of his eyelids. His skin and clothes felt icky with salt, and his mouth dry and prickly as cold time grass. The air was humid and breezeless in a gritty way, not like the jungle's mist, which was soft and damp.

There wasn't a drop of land in sight. He sat up in his boat, looked for the shore, and it simply wasn't there. He had always wondered what it was like to

be *out there*, on the vast waters that scrolled right up to the end of the world. Well, now he knew.

It sucked.

Yan was gone. A piece of his soul died with it, though at least dead things can't feel pain. He didn't cry any more over the loss. He wasn't quite sure how to feel.

He didn't know which he regretted more: going into the village after the girl, or not even finding her. He wanted to see her again before it was too late. He wanted be with her, like a friend, like he was with Yan. She was the first real sign that he wasn't alone in the world—he wasn't the only one of his kind—and he let her get away. He wanted to tell her that she was like an exotic flower and that she sang like the birds—the pretty birds, not the "caw caw" birds or the "hoo hoo" ones—but he didn't know how, and now he never would.

There were no people, no critters, no fresh water and no shade, not even from clouds. It was just him, the ocean, the sun and his boat.

He was helplessly, utterly… alone.

Three sunrises later, he was almost done. The sun had baked him to a crispy, peeling red. The floor of

his boat was splintery and uncomfortable, no matter how he tucked and bent to fit inside it. The water was abundantly sickening and the wooden slats of his vessel didn't taste good. He didn't know how he got so far into nowhere, but he kept cruising in that direction at the speed of boring.

In hindsight, he wished he had died in the fires. He had no way to live, much less anything left to live for.

It was the hottest, ugliest part of the bright time, and he'd stuck his head under a seat, the only relief from the sun's bombardment. He was wondering how painful and quickly his life would end if he just jumped overboard and started breathing in, when he heard something other than the lapping of waves against the hull of his boat. It was a lofty trill, as from a bird.

He popped up and squinted into a rare cloud. A flickering silhouette was circling overhead. It was a bird, a real critter!

…It wasn't doing any hell of good all the way up there, though. So much for lunch. He let out a long, haggard sigh and wilted over the edge of the boat, his arms dragging in the gently sloshing sea.

(“…idn’t a boat o’er… ye dun…?”)

So thirsty… so tired…

(“…give… spyglass ’ere… or not…”)

…Was he hearing voices?

(“I’ll… damned.…a… boat… lad…”)
(“What?”)
(“I said it’s a wee boat with a wee lad! Pick the seaweed outta yer ears.”)
(“All the way out here?)

He could hardly keep his eyes open, but he would swear he saw a funny, pointy cloud out there.

(“Let’s pull ’er over and see if we kin help ’im out.”)
(“Aye.”)

His vision blurred and blotted out. It faded harshly back in, an indeterminate while later, to a coppery clatter and shouts raining over his suddenly shaded head.

“Oi! Laddie! You alive down there?” accompanied the ringing blasts.
“Quit ringin’ that blasted bell!”
The clatter ceased. “Just getting ’iz attention. Ye no hafta yell at me.”

“And ye no hafta wake Leviathan while you’re at it, you wanker.”

In front of his eyes was another boat. It was larger twenty fold, coated with cracked blue and silver, and sporting an expansive, lazily flapping sail, much like on the ships he used to sight off the shores of the people village. Their boats were curved like swans, though, while this boat was hard-edged and squat.

He gazed up at two men peering over the rim of their vessel and into his puny rowboat. People. *People*. He was ready to cry fresh tears all over again, out of relief and fear of their unknown intentions and exhaustion altogether.

“Ey, he’s awake!” one of the sailors noticed with a delighted grunt.
“Ahoy there!” the other greeted him. “What’chyoo doing all the way out here in that lil’ dinghy?”

He blinked groggily. Why did people talk so much? They were worse than coyotes and owls combined.

“Ai! Eh? He’s no one for talkin’, seems like.”
“Would’je shut yer hole for a change, Pica? He’s lookin’ half dead and yer blatherin’ away at ‘im

instead of riggin' up the boat to rescue the poor laddie."
"Aye, aye, shut up, I'm working on it."

The two disappeared onto the deck of their boat, where the boy joined them after an episode of bumbling, cursing and rigging.

The sailors were good people, if strange. It took a couple of hours of (mostly) one-sided banter for them to figure out that the child wasn't picking up a word of their talk. Even then, their manner remained friendly, if slower and more deliberate, as if dragging out their syllables was going to ignite comprehension in the clueless boy. He was only happy that they fed him as much fish and clear water as he liked, without a hitch.

They didn't quite resemble any people he'd seen before, either. They didn't have tails *or* horns, and one walked and talked like a human, but didn't look anything like. He was stocky, with blunt limbs and blue, leathery skin. He had a sloping face that curled down at the muzzle, and he snorted when he spoke. Boy was inwardly debating his critter status the entire time.

He stayed with the weird people on their boat for the rest of the day and a night, keeping well out of

the sun and in a cozy bunk to recover his fried vitality. He'd never known such a soft, clean bed, though it reeked of old fish and both the sailors at once. The pillow was some kind of shirt stuffed with wool, something he wished he'd thought of seasons ago. He honestly wished he could carry around a bed like that to sleep upon every night.

The next morning, his belly full and his weary bones rejuvenated, he headed out to explore the deck and welcome the day. He found the critter sailor snoring in a net that was stretched above the floor between the mast and the guardrail, another neat bed Boy took note of.

The crew of two turned out to be "fishermen." Boy stood around and in the way of the men, extremely inquisitive, as they tossed out and hauled in a giant net over and over, dragging in either handfuls of boatloads of fish that glistened with stink. After a midday meal of (naturally) more fish, the sailors were no longer occupied with their nets, and instead loitered about while their sail clapped in a stiff wind. Boy watched them play cards, a completely mystifying and seemingly dull activity, before losing interest in their obscure game and climbing all over the rigging, the ropes and chains reminding him of his faraway jungle. He leapt and

swung at play, as he once did through trees and vines, until the sailors took notice and turned angry-sounding words on him.

These people, he decided while pondering their motives, must be anti-play, the same way the horned people were anti-food.

Sunset was painting the billowing canvas sheets when the boat finally pulled in sight of land. Boy admired the approaching cliffs from sea level, the sky-scraping ledges appearing grander by the minute. Sandy-colored boulders were stacked upon slate and around tufts of green wood, the sheared face of the continent looking like a landslide of giant tortoises and grapefruits in the blushing daylight.

As they sailed closer, the top of the world gradually slipped out of sight and the jagged shore became prominent. Boy was moreover intrigued to watch the boat turn into a harbor that was scooped out of the sea foam and vertically jutting rocks. They sailed up to an F-shaped lane of wooden planks, dropped anchor, and stepped off a rope ladder onto the dock.

There were several boats and their people, about four handfuls to count, scattered around. They chattered as much as ever and loitered alongside

crates and barrels that were built up into shoddy little forts. The dock bore straight into the cliff, where it turned a dark corner into a cave. Once the fishermen waved Boy off their vessel and onto steady ground again, he began to prowl around the perimeter in broad circles, testing the boards with his nose and heavy stamping.

The demihuman chuckled at the scene. “Ye’d think he never saw dry land before.”
“Heh, looka’im. Maybe he’s no sea dog—he’s just a dog.”
They both laughed.

While the child was investigating an algae-dyed post the two entered quieter conference.
“What’re we gonna do with him, anyway? We cannae take ’im home to mum.”
“Why not?”
“Why not? Ye’re a dense bastard. If we—”

“Ahoy, blockheads!” A third sailor swaggered up to them, grinning amicably.

“Ahoy, dickhead!” the two greeted him in turn, and the group exchanged rough, friendly hugs.

“Long time no see!”

“Aye!”
“Aye. What’re you doin’ here? We last saw ye off Alexandria.”

“Well, yah, but the carp turned south this year, y’know?”

“It’s been a freak season.”

“Yah.”

“Heard from Danny?”

“Yah. He’s goin’ into airships now, y’know?”

“Bah, e’rybody is these days.”

“Hey, ye won’t believe what we picked up the other day.”
“Oh yeah, it’s somethin’. Quite a story.”

“Oh? What is it?”

“He’s right over—”
The two sailors spun around, searching the dock, to no avail. The kid was out of sight.

“…er…”
“Oi! He’s gone!”

Boy sniffed his way down the stone hall, arriving in a room unlike any cave he'd set foot in before. It was a large, open space, lit like afternoon by still, white torches suspended from a ceiling of criss-crossed, rusty beams. The floors and walls were of smooth, flat grey rock. The predominant sounds and odors, respectively, were a grinding metal buzz and fish musk dipped in motor oil, two more new things in this entirely alien experience.

At the opposite end of the chamber, a deep, wide, flat-bedded trough disappeared into another, connecting tunnel. There were men pushing carts up to the edge and dumping crates one after the other into little boats that sat on iron rails instead of water.

He dropped into the loading space and padded around the cargo trolleys on his hands and feet, boggled by the mechanism. He thought of gargants, those giant bugs that crawled along the jungle's pipelines, but these were a little less… animated, and constructed of wood and metal, besides.

He stood up on his toes and peeked over the side into one of the rail carts. He caught the slightest whiff of something good and juicy inside, but all he could see were barrels. He grunted and crawled into the cart, rooting around for the hidden treat. Before

he could track down the scent amid the sacks of potatoes and fish, the cart jerked abruptly and sent him head-over-heels to the floorboards, which grated against his raw, sunburnt skin.

“raaarraayan,” he growled and hissed, and then climbed to his feet again. Looking out of the cart, he saw one dim light after the next whisking by, the transport racing through a dark corridor on cable-laced tracks. He clung to the side of his cart and watched the tracks unroll in its wake with wary anticipation, until finally it rumbled to a halt at the tunnel’s exit.

He was in another room now, though it was much like the last. A dugout along the opposite wall hosted another set of tracks for cars like his own, and in the middle men rearranged boxes and barrels with rolling buggies or pulleys. A man approached his stopped cart just as he was climbing out and touching down on the rails again.

“Hey, kid,” the man said with a surprised ring the moment the child made eye contact with him. “What’re you doing here?”

The eyes of other men in the room suddenly turned on him. “How did that kid get here?”

“A kid? Where?”
“Looks like he came in on this trolley, here.”

Kid stepped up to the edge of the loading platform, a wary eye on the man who first spoke to him. Why were they all looking at him? Were they angry? Were they nice, like the fishermen? Did they want him to do something, or did he do something wrong?

“Well he ain’t allowed in here, however he got in.”

“You heard him,” the first man was speaking to him again. He stepped towards the kid and threw a hand over his shoulder, some kind of directional gesture. “Get out of there and stay out of the way. We’re workin’ here.”

When the kid stared dumbly at him, still trying to calculate the intent of the surrounding humans, the man became frustrated and started towards him.

“Hey, what’re you, deaf? I said get outta there—”

“Ahh!” Kid shrieked and jumped away from the big hand that was reaching down to pull him out of the tunnel-space.

“Hey! Get back here! Don’t run—augh.”
Kid ran up to where the tracks stopped dead at a wall and searched for the quickest escape from there. Other men were laughing while the first began walking fast along the platform after him, grumbling, “Christ, what’s wrong with this kid?”

The man was getting closer, he was getting closer! And he sounded mad. Not willing to face an angry man and not wanting to trek back through that tunnel, Kid scrambled up onto the higher ground, dashed through shuffled cargo and workers, and flew out the nearest portal. He didn’t stop at the stairwell he met to check if he was still being chased, nor did he stop until he reached the top, spooked and panting. There was a strange fixture damming the passageway. It was a door, something he had seen before on the big boat, and before that in the horned people city (though he never operated any of those), but this one didn’t swing open freely when he pushed on it, and it had a funny ball protruding from the side of its face, like a metal snout.

He stood like a stump before this obstacle, completely vexed by it. What kind of stupid door won’t open! The people who made this were dumb.
At the sound of someone scaling the steps behind

him, Kid panicked and shrank into the corner, the door's steadfast hinges pressing into his back. He swallowed an apprehensive squeak as another strange man plodded right up to the door, grabbed its knob, twisted it, and shoved the block of wood outward, flooding the stairwell with the outdoors. He passed the kid a queer and then apathetic look before walking out and away.

Kid threw himself forward and around the recoiling door before it shut him in again. He paced onto the sky-covered lot, the cement's retained sunlight warming his toes, and gazed around him at the wondrous new world.

It was awesome: a sprawling mountain of houses, towers, rooftops and steeples. It was not like the horned people city, where adobe shelters with creamy, domed caps and whitewashed eaves were arrayed nicely, one beside the other along straight roads on terraced neighborhoods; this was a surveyor's apocalypse, structures crowded together and clambering over one another like an oversized litter of pups competing for the bitch's milk. Stores and warehouses melted over dwellings that leaned on warped brick walls. It was a freakish vision of the jungle meeting the city, a human-ordered haven with all the haphazard chaos of the wild. Lampposts were

trees, streets were rivers, clotheslines were vines, flights of stairs were waterfalls, people were the dominant critters and nothing and nobody was going everywhere and nowhere with no respect to the other.

The horned people city was nothing compared to this—it wasn't even a city anymore. THIS was *the* city, the largest city ever—the largest in the world, a kingdom of gold and rubies in the setting sun.

Kid left behind the shipyards and the men that stunk of fish and grease and ventured forth alone, eagerly curious, intimidated and more than a little lost. He felt like he could wander for days and never see the same edifice twice, though much of the metropolis was built of the same design: bricks and plaster holding up cherry red shingles that sloped up to lopsided edges or conical points. The cobblestone streets waved up and down, in and out, narrow and wide around uneven blocks with portals and windows of many shapes and hues. He saw colored glass and clear doors. He saw boats that sailed through the sky, sputtering and roaring like a zaghnol calf being carried off by hornets.

He saw people of even more flavors than the horned kind, in still more exotic garb. Many of these

were “critter-people” like the elephantoid sailor he had met on the sea. Goat-people, rat-people, boar-people and horse-faced people were common fare and walked alongside hornless, tailless humans as if nothing was the matter. People wore anything from fur, wool and leather to denim, lace, silk, velvet and feathers, arranged in all odd fashions about their persons. Shiny things such as draping beads and tiny hoops through the ears were apparent on many. As far as Kid could tell, one way everyone resembled each other, even the horned people he left far behind, was that they all chattered like bees.

The more he explored, the more he could relate to. Much like the forest of the giant tree, all avenues culminated in their roundabout way at the center of the city, where a gargantuan structure rose above all others. It was not a green, blooming thing like the great tree, but a stony, spired citadel that the soaring boats flocked around like birds. Most peculiar was its large plate of a face, with limbs that turned around in methodical, ticking circles from its nose. Kid could never approach the lofty novelty to judge its critter alignment, nor could he even reach the castle’s threshold, wherever it might’ve been, so grand and convoluted was the city before him.

His new jungle had several vital rules, each learned the hard way.

He found he couldn’t relieve himself any place he wished, as people took offense to peeing on even the most mundane, inanimate objects, such as walls and posts.
He was yelled at and swat down from seemingly innocuous perches such as guardrails, lamp stands, fountains, statues, windowsills, flower pots, clotheslines and climbing gutters.
He couldn’t sleep any old place, either, and he learned to hide his naps from the people who wore quilts with pointy hats and wielded sickle-clubs.
Once he mastered the use of doors, nobody seemed to want him to use the skill, for every time he successfully opened a door and entered a domicile, someone inside was ready to chase him back out.

The worst and most frustrating penalties came with food. There was a part of town where the air hung rich with the aroma of harvest and baked, tasty things were displayed in the wide-paneled windows of storefronts. He could follow his complaining stomach into these shops or up to a booth laden with edibles, but the moment he reached for a morsel and indulged his appetite he was swiftly and uncompromisingly taught better.

All told, he was easily and readily ignored until he touched something that people liked or wanted. In order to survive he was compelled to act in shadows, creeping where none would bother looking and emerging in public view only fleetingly, to snatch bites and pieces from the unsuspecting. When he couldn’t find a fountain or was shooed away from one, he drank the fetid water that ran down gutters and pooled around storm drains. He made bed in those shady walks squeezed between buildings, where only cats, rats and lesser critters quarreled with him over dumpster scraps. Skulking and blending in became his specialty.

His number one rule was that he could do anything he wanted, as long as no one saw him do it.

“Thief!”

It was too good to resist: buttered garlic bread fresh out of the oven, steaming ripe and golden for the taking. He was usually too sensible about fresh food to pilfer it from the indoor shops, but today he was especially hungry—and careless, to boot. He banked on being able to get away with a whole loaf

in his arms before the fat baker caught up with him, and the chase was on.

“Get back here, you little…! Thief!” The baker and his broom were in hot pursuit. Thief skipped around oblivious pedestrians as he spun a route through the congested business district. He was proving too light and quick for the bullishly charging shop keep, and he was sure he could make it to the back-alleys without a hitch until a sickle’s head struck his path.

Thief slipped and stumbled to a halt before the grounded weapon, which was in the clutches of a quilt man. “Stop right there, thief!” the city patrol demanded as two more of his ilk stepped off their posts and moved to encircle the boy.

Thief bounced back up and sprinted in the opposite direction, but around the next corner came the flailing-mad baker, looking as threatening in ruddy-cheeked rage as any of the cops. The boy, about to be surrounded, took up the loaf of bread in his mouth as a cat would a kitten, rushed up the concrete porch of the nearest building, launched himself off that ramp and onto a high windowsill. From there sprang towards the gutter pipe, catching and clinging to it like a lemur.

“He’s climbing up that wall!”
“Quick, he’s gonna get away!”

As he scampered up the pipes, chunks of his loaf regrettably broke away and exploded into crumbs on the sidewalk below. He’d make time to count his losses later, and instead focused on hoisting himself onto the roof and disappearing over its crest. While he made his way down the other side of the building and into another section of the district, he could faintly hear his hunters’ exasperated bickering.

“I can’t believe he climbed right over that building!”
“Can we get to the other side?”
“This door’s locked!”
“We’d have to go around.”
“By the time we got to Crocket Street he’d be long gone.”
“Damnit, he got away.”
“We could break down this door?”
“Forget it, it’s not worth it. Let him go.”
“Aw, nuts.”

A nude woman shrieked and pulled the curtains shut over her window as Thief passed it by on the way to the ground. He wondered what about him looked scary, or why people didn’t care for him

scaling their houses. He made sure to stay on the outside! There was no pleasing most people.

He touched down on the cobblestone walk again and crossed the street, entering a safe-looking alley where he could enjoy his steal… what was left of it. The remaining pieces were still warm, moist and delicious, well worth the effort. He was picking and licking up the very last bits when his nose detected something familiar and inviting.

He stuck a look out into main traffic to see what smelled alluring. Across the way, the spotted the tell-tale design of another bakery, windows filled with cakes and pastries. It was just another cruel tease, he thought—something for otherpeople and not for him. He was still hungry, but not enough to go putting his neck on the line again.
That was when he spied movement in the alley adjacent to the shop. A scrawny man in an apron tossed two sacks into a dumpster, dropped the lid on it and walked away, back into the bakery.

Thief got the idea to sneak over and investigate the new garbage. He ran up to the dumpster, keeping low as he trespassed across another street, propped open its lid and sifted through the waste. He was gleefully rewarded with two burlap sacks filled with

leftover goodies: tarts, pies, seasoned breads and better things either soggy with coffee, not finished or not bothered at all.
It was the proverbial *jackpot*.

He hatched a routine, right there: he'd bed in the safe alley across from his favorite bakery, scavenge over city grounds throughout the day, and in the evening, as soon as the shop of goodies closed up and tossed things out, he'd be right over to take second pickings.

It was cold time again, and the worst yet.

He had no idea the world could become so bitter and so cold that rain would shiver and turn sluggish, forming icy mounds instead of puddles along the many creases in the roads. The shrill wind buffeted clock towers and belfries and concentrated blasts through the close-knit streets. From the seclusion of his thankfully breezeless alley, Thief would watch paper and other debris through clouds of his own breath as they got kicked around the cobblestones by ferocious winter gusts.

He'd settled in a cozy hideout, sandwiched between a pair of high-rises that luckily warded off

most of the elements. The majority of rain came in the form of cooking scraps and sludge tumbling out of tenants' windows. Through all the rubbish Thief was able to procure cardboard and paper with lots of black scribbles that sufficed to sleep with. For an extra treat, though, he scaled the outdoor plumbing to pluck shirts and sheets from clotheslines. One sheet passed for a blanket and the shirts, when stuffed with crumpled paper, made decent pillows, something he'd wanted since his stay on the fishing boat. He meanwhile tore the other sheet to shreds and wrapped them around his freezing feet and hands until they looked like snowballs, comfort forsaking vanity.

He missed Yan, though. Yan was fuzzy and warm, the best pillow of all.

Not inclined to move around in the biting chill, Thief had little to do between naps and supper but reminisce on warmer, better times, when he and Yan ruled the land and nobody was around to hoard all the food or tell them where they could and couldn't take a leak.

He remembered how he used to hunt instead of forage during the cold time, which inspired black ideas. He never used to consider the people around

him for a food source, but he did image what they tasted like, sometimes. He wondered how humans were really any different from the critters he used to tear to pieces and devour in the dog-eat-dog world of the jungle.
Still, he didn't enjoy killing other living, breathing critters—it left a bad taste in his mouth, in more than one sense. He didn't picture the critters' existences as too far removed from his own—beings just doing what they have to in order to survive and be happy. It seemed like a shame, sometimes, that for some creatures to secure their life and well being, they had to destroy others.

Besides that flicker of conscience, human hunting didn't look like a safe idea. People roamed in herds and could be as clever as he; one bad move would have a swarm of them on his back. He recalled the ferocity he unleashed on that wolf-critter that attacked Yan; if he was ganged up on for stealing a loaf of bread or a peach, he was terrified of the people's reaction to killing one of their own.

One of their own…

It was funny, he thought, that he was first attracted to the human city because they reminded him of himself. He thought he had found "his own."

It was ironic, then, that he'd never felt more rejected in his life than when he was amongst them.

Warm time was back, and he couldn't be more grateful. He could shed his plundered winter wardrobe and walk freely and comfortably around again.

The whole city suffered a change of pace. There were more people out and about in general, from hunchbacked old men feeding pigeons to children giggling and screaming with play. Rain became a refreshing event instead of a plague.

Bells clanged at certain parts of the day, marking a tide of people flowing in and out of strange, octagonal buildings. He decided to merge with traffic one day and infiltrate one of these houses of interest, but a stern man pushed him away at the door. He then took the unbeaten path straight up the wall's support beams, and from the open rooftop laced with colorful banners he'd spy on the floor within.

Though he witnessed it all, he couldn't grasp what the fuss was about. He saw people crowded around a stage, upon which a handful of humans

stood and spoke loudly, for all to hear. The stage-bound ones ran around in bright clothing and talked a lot in that language Thief still didn't understand, and occasionally the audience would whoop, boo or laugh. It was curious, but not fascinating enough to merit his attendance once a day, as some people apparently thought it was.

His schedule was the same every day for weeks and months, with the occasional, inexplicable oddity to stand out in his memory, such as a three-legged dog, a catfight or one of the more creative children's games. He was finally growing used to city life and his place in it, yet not in it, and it wasn't so bad after all.

It was an especially simmering day at the peak of warm time. Thief slept in, snoozing the heat off in the shade of his alley. However, as the morning wore on his drowsiness evaporated, and before long he was splayed on his back over a spread of newspapers, staring listlessly at his tunnel-view of the sky and the gently swaying laundry strung in layers overhead. His eye lingered on a cockroach scaling the red bricks as it gradually picked its way above the mildew line. It was way too hot to get up

today… Other people must have agreed, for it was awfully quiet around town. He couldn't hear a single peep nearby.

Then a close, deep-throated growl spoke otherwise. The boy shot up, alarmed, and found himself staring into the face of a critter. It wasn't a cat, rat, or others of the dumpster folk; it was a real *critter*, big and snarling the song of the jungle. Thief recognized it almost immediately as one of the kind that he had slain for Yan: black, smoky fur, red eyes and everything.

Its stance was mean, hungry, and closing in with barely restrained anticipation for the kill. The boy couldn't believe it. A jungle critter! *Here!* How, why?

He could have hypothesized all day long if he didn't have to deal with survival right then. As soon as Thief stepped off his bed the wolf-thing was springing for him, long jaws agape and foaming. The boy hopped onto the rim of an upright trash tin, which tipped under his weight and spilled with a cymbal crash over the critter's ears. By the time the stunned beast escaped from the clamor, Thief was already sprinting down the street.

The scene he ran into, however, stunted his idea of escape: more critters, everywhere, on every road and in every alley. He spotted a few hardy people fending off the leaping charges of mus, fangs, giant spiders and raven-beaked eagles, long-reaching weapons in hand, but the population at large was monsters now, not humans.

This was some kind of really bright and vivid nightmare, Thief decided, though as another fang joined the one he had left behind and began chasing his tail, it didn't seem like he was going to wake up any time soon. The boy scampered away, trying to lose them, but they had the advantage of open ground and Thief was soon faced with either a pit of mus and thrashing humans at the bottom of the next set of stairs, or the two critters racing to meet him at the top.

He turned back to the fangs, sucked it up and welcomed a brawl. The first critter flew at him paws-first in a tackle. Thief sidestepped the furry blur and leapt at the runner-up, leap-frogging off its skull and landing behind it. Noticing a lamppost in front of him, he jumped for it, and just as the fangs whipped around to meet him the boy was swinging their way in a wide arc, his outstretched foot connecting with the muzzle of the nearest victim.

Thief hit the ground and rolled under another charge from the fang that wasn't reeling in pain. He leaned back onto his two feet, cupped his fists together and knocked a tooth out of the predator, which was whipping around to unwittingly receive the blow. It stumbled back as the other was recovering, and the boy gave that one like treatment with a falling heel.

—move fast, strike first, don't let them even get close, don't wrangle, just hit them again and again and again—

It became a brutal cycle, beating one back in time to kick the next, until the two critters took enough bruises and busted chaps to get the better idea to flee.

"Yaaaaan!" he was yelling triumphant after their tucked-in tails, the sidewalk littered with ashen fur and his knuckles yet stinging from the punches.

And then came the mus, a veritable stampede of blue fluff with claws and fangs. "—eep," his boasting was cut short as half a dozen of the critters bounded up the stairs and right into his avenue. He chose flight over fight this round, turning a corner onto a different road, though even as he cut through two narrow passes between crooked, steeple-

crowned houses, the mus kept up the pace, hounding his every step.

He shot out of a strange alley into another hostile neighborhood, where more men with axes and pikes slogged at spiders that were large enough to prey on them, given a clear shot. Leaving the people to their eight-legged fun, Thief stood his ground for the incoming mus.

They were smaller and less powerful than the fangs, but their number was more than a handful. He flipped over the rushes of two before saddling the back of the third, listening to its keening complaint as he tried to crunch its spine like a bug. Unfortunately, his mass wasn't near enough, and the bucking mu tossed him off just as a fourth planted its puppy-esque canines in his shoulder. Entwined critter and boy wrestled over the bumpy pavement, greasing the city's baking sheet with blood, sweat and razorback hair.

Another mu piled on, and then another. They moved in quick, frenzied streaks like cats and snapped and pulled like dogs. Thief was kicking and tearing, shoving one off in time to become the next's chew-toy. The fight came to him in lightning flashes and was timed in heartbeats. He saw his foot put a

dent in a nose, his fist sink into an eye, his elbow peg a rib and his tail constrict around a bushy neck, slamming a critter head-first into the ground, all in one breath and out the next, growling and roaring, howling and screaming.

Eventually, somehow, the pack had enough, and they trickled away like sand through his mitts, limping and yelping. The boy staggered to his feet, his arms and knees burning with pebble-strewn abrasions and one sleeve damp and warm with red. “Yan!” he barked at their retreating paw prints, grinning like a proud idiot.

This was his jungle. His jungle! He owned the jungle and all its critters, damned be anyone who challenges him!

Then he saw what the mus were really running from.

The spider’s call put the hair on his neck on end, and when he turned around he was standing in its long-legged shadow. It gave some wet, suckling cry, like a hog swallowing a gasping fish, its mandibles churning in its hollow face like livid fingers over invisible harp strings.

This was becoming a very long, very very bad nightmare.

He somersaulted on a critter's reflex, springing backwards off his hands to dodge a stab from one of the spider's pickaxe appendages. Thief then turned and once again ran, this time into an aisle between a shop and a derelict warehouse.

The spider was not far behind while the boy spring-boarded off a trash can onto a dumpster, then onto a barren window box, and then off a broken stovepipe, taking hold of scum-coated cables threaded between opposing windows. The stalking critter squeezed its sprawling form into the alley and attempted to mount a wall, gaining the impossibly tiny footholds in the mortar and working its way up to meet him.

Thief huffed at his luck and fell back, hooking the high-wire with his feet and tail and looping around low, taking a centrifugal boost and all the acrobatics he'd perfected in the vine-riddled treetops into a swinging leap—just right, just strong and far enough—yes! He caught the line away and above, another level higher than the spider.

Then the cable snapped. He clutched the wire as it unraveled from one end and dropped, taking him

with it. Thief felt that rising sensation in his gut, forcing a yell out of his lungs, as gravity pulled him down, seemingly one piece at a time, until the length of cord unfurled too short and yanked him towards the flank of the warehouse. His legs grazed the spider's head—he wasn't sure if he hurt it, but it screamed—and then the wall was coming fast to greet him—no, a window— "aaaaaaaaaah!"

He stuck his feet out, braced for a hard, fast impact, but once he connected with the window it gave into crackling, sparkling splinters and he didn't stop at all. The cable ripped out of his white-fisted grip and left him flailing through the air like a crippled duck. It was a relatively short drop to a sheet of flat, unforgiving cement, a flurry of crystals sprinkling around him.

For a very nice, peaceful moment, nothing moved. There was only the sound of his recovering breath competing with his heart while he lay facedown on a cool floor in a puddle of broken glass.

Then there was prickling, jabbing pain all over, pieces of glass rubbing into raw scrapes he didn't even know he had until then. He pooled weary limbs beneath his body, aggravating the many tiny cuts in

his dizzy effort to pull himself together. His shirt and frayed trousers were freckled with blood that seeped out of bite marks and sheered layers of skin.

He moaned as the room came into focus alongside his senses. It was a large, skeletal stockroom, lit only via high, clouded windows like the one he had just shattered. Without lamps or sun, noon's twilight enveloped the cavernous hall, filling it with gloomy grey.

In the middle of the floor was the only piece of furniture, a sheet of metal on four legs for a table. Upon this were two baskets and a pile of either very fine grass or very dry dirt; it was difficult to discern in the dim setting. Around the table gathered four people, big men.
For the first time in seemingly forever, Thief was relieved to see human beings—at least they weren't savage critters.

The people didn't seem especially thrilled to see him, though. They were still as statues, lips tight, eyes keenly locked on the boy and glints of sharp steel in their hands. A tall, bald, deep-voiced, dark-skinned man was first to speak.

"The hell?"

The outburst opened a bemused, three-way debate, hands and knives pointing in circles around the boy and the other men. “Is it a monster?”
“No, it’s a kid.”
“What’s a kid doing in here?”
“He just dropped right in, there.”
“Anybody know where he came from?”
“I’d say the window.”
“I got that, you dumbass.”

The dark one’s question projected over the others, who fell silent for it. “What’re you doing here, boy?” As far as Thief could tell, the shout was mean, impatient and aimed straight at him. The boy stood up, once more ready for anything. These people were probably going to toss him back outside, as was proper, and he could handle that, though he wished they’d wait for all the critters to go away before he was ejected into the din again.

They didn’t advance on him right away, though. Instead, they seemed to be waiting for him to say something. He had no idea where or how to start communicating—he didn’t even know how to say he couldn’t.

However impotent his answer would’ve been, the boy was interrupted by a fourth voice. It rang of

gargling gravel and sounded bluntly dismissive. “Who cares. Whatever he’s doing, he’s seen too much. Just get rid of him.”

“As you say, boss.”

Three of the men disconnected from the table and slowly approached the boy—a short and round guy, the tall and dark guy, and some fellow in-between with an aardvark’s muzzle. Their walk was lumbering, deathly serious and discreet, as if they bore some secret on their shoulders that they would sooner kill to protect than reveal. The aardvark had steely knuckles bared, the fat one had his knife at itching reach on his belt, and the tall, dark one carried nothing that Thief could see, yet seemed no less intimidating for it. All wore long, dark trench coats, which seemed strange in summer.

“All right, kid,” short&fat talked some sweet venom through his blubbery cheeks. “Just stay right there. We won’t hurt ya.”

The foreboding in the air was stifling. These men were perhaps worse than the wild critters. Letting them near him felt like a bad idea. Goosebumps spread up his back with their every step. They spoke easy and tread softly, though, not like angry humans, but rather like the fang that disturbed his nap

minutes ago. Thief wasn't sure what to make of them until tall&dark lunged forward and grabbed him.

He touched him—that was it—Thief's attack mode switched on. He struggled in his captor's arms, tough and burly as they were, while the man secured his hold around the boy and lifted him off the ground. "All right, kid!" the phrase was now grunted, forceful and aggressive, "Hold still and—AHHHG!"

Thief's bite was drawing crimson syrup from the man's hand. Tall&dark spit curses, but refused to release the boy, which was fair enough for Thief, who took the opportunity to curl up and throw his knees over his head, kicking the man in the face. The thug hunched over, letting the boy plop to the floor, and while the man was cradling his busted nose Thief rolled up and head-butted him in the gut. It was easy to push the winded man aside after that.

The back-up crew was next, metal flickering through the dull shadows as they lashed at the ducking and flipping boy. These foes were bigger and stronger than the wolf and dog-things, but fatally slow. Thief had just enough stamina left to run circles around and between the remaining toughs, driving them into a tight knot that was

suddenly slashing at tails that became coattails that became wrong feet and friendly fire.

The melee culminated with blubberface getting smacked upside the ear by an ill-placed fist while Thief pounced on the lurching aardvark's shoulders, throwing everyone to the floor. The three scrambled in a disoriented pile with the boy on top, who grabbed a clump of fur on the back of the demihuman's head and smashed his face into the cement until he didn't move again.

"You little shit!" the fat one snarled, a thread of spittle breaking off onto the knife he reached over to stick into the nearest lump of flesh. Thief wailed and rolled off the aardvark's back, pawing at the gaping tear in his thigh. Through the haze of pain, fear and frenzy the boy saw the blade coming down again to finish the job. He spun onto his good knee, hooked clawing fingers into the thug's sleeve and pulled himself onto short&fat's knife-wielding arm. The thug staggered around in jerks like a confused, raging bronco, fighting to wrench the clinging little kid from his arm while a surprisingly strong tail slapped in him the face over and over.

"Get—off—me—you—little—!"

A good chew on his wrist convinced short&fat to drop his weapon, which the boy immediately dove for. The thug roared at the bite and swooped down after the knife as well, and from that point it was only a matter of which was the faster.

Later, when the adrenaline drained out of his system and he could be alone with his thoughts, Thief would remember wrapping his fingers around the handle of that knife—almost intuitively, as if it belonged to him, like that griffin claw he used to treasure in the old jungle—and twirling around to plunge the sliver of steel into the man's falling belly. He'd remember the way time paused to the strangled hiccup of that man, he'd remember the blood that spilled down his arms and over his hair when he dragged the digging blade from the man's navel to his sternum, and he'd remember how heavy the man felt as the boy navigated out from under his collapsing form, leaving the thug's weapon where it belonged.

But then, at that moment, all Thief could think was that he got to it first and he was still alive somehow and that man would stop and maybe, just maybe, for the love of all that is good, he could stop fighting today.

The boy wobbled on his toes, a still body stretched flat before him, another wheezing and coughing behind him, and a third bent in spasms over the field of glass, grunting and gagging on his own fluids. Everything smelled like sweat and dying things seasoned with dust and Thief was going to be sick or pass out or both, all the fight leaking out of his bones—this wasn't like the fangs and goblins this wasn't like the burning death that the rain and sea washed out this was sticky, warm, rotten death these peopled wanted him dead why why what did he do what has he done he couldn't even eat the kill he wasn't hungry anymore anyway—oh but his leg hurt—

A solemn, weighty clapping issued from the table, from which that fourth, hidden man rose. He had a boar's countenance, a wide stature and a fiery mane that swept up his forehead, between his chipped ears and down his neck into the gold collar of his shiny, scarlet jacket. He took deliberate, patient strides up to the broken scene, surveying the damage. His beady, yellowed eyes rested on the drooping, panting boy.

Thief slipped on a spot of blood that was swelling at his heel and dropped to his hands and knees. He turned his bleary vision up to the man that now

hovered in front of him. The boar was studying him with a cocked snout, some crooked smirk twined around his short tusks. Did he want to fight, too? The boy didn't know if he could take it anymore.

After a protracted wait the boar reached into his jacket, which jingled with buttons and little chains as it was pushed open, and withdrew an ornamented staff. It was not quite as tall as the boy, hammer-headed and crossed with jagged veins of quartz. The boar held it out over Thief's head, not as if to strike him with it but rather for show, which puzzled the child.

"That's enough," the man uttered in raspy deadpan. A ball of light then catapulted off the head of the staff and ripped through the boy. It was as hot and buzzing as a million bee stings at once, and that was the last thing Thief felt before blacking out.

The world came around again, dim and swirling and odious, and Thief was welcomed to a different room.

It was spartan and poorly illuminated like the warehouse, though much smaller, a kerosene lamp tied to a nail in the ceiling expected to light its

grungy, rusting corners. One of the walls was a vertical array of iron bars, seemingly insubstantial for showing so much of the hall beyond, yet the boy doubted on second thought that he could pass or bust through them.

Not that he could even reach them. He was bound to a chair by rope around his ankles and middle. His hands were tied behind the chair's back and his tail was knotted through the cords as well—he supposed someone learned the hard way about the latter and wanted to be extra careful.
Something else he noticed about his person was that the greater half of one of his pant legs was cut and stripped away, exposing a bloody bandage around his thigh.

He was hungry, thirsty, dirty, sore and numb in places where the ropes were tied too tight, but the worst of it was that he wasn't alone.

"I can't believe Gumbo's dead."

All the while he was gathering his bearings, three men were pacing around his chair, musing out loud to one another. He recognized each in turn.

"Dickhole deserved what he got."

The black man had a wad of white gauze taped over his nose and the aardvark looked a little more rugged than he remembered, but no worse for wear. He didn't see the fat one, but he didn't expect to—not anymore, not after what Thief did to him. A mixed pang of horror, disgust and satisfaction at last hit the boy over his first human kill, and he might have felt remorse if he didn't think the brute deserved it after attacking him for no good reason.

"Yeah, but still. We all got punked like we were nothin'. Who the hell is this kid?"

The third man was his gracious host, the corpulent boar. His fur was combed into slick, dark clumps that glistened like crude oil in the lamplight, and the tuft of wiry hair that sprouted from his balding chin wiggled comically alongside a precariously balanced cigar when he talked.

"Who knows. What do you think, boys?"

"Looks like a regular street rat to me," the black one said, leaning into one corner with a nonchalant shrug.

"A street rat that knows how to rumble," the aardvark appended as he roamed about restlessly.

“And what was he doin’, crashing our gig all by himself?”

The boar hummed and rubbed his frazzled whiskers. “That’s what I want to know.” Once Thief caught his eye, the ostentatiously dressed demihuman stepped up to his chair, leaned over the boy and blew smoke into his face. Thief cringed and hacked through the noxious puff.

“So, you’re awake, you little squirt,” the boar said with a rumbling sigh. He stood up straight and took another whiff of his cigar. “That was a pretty stupid stunt you pulled back there. At first I thought you were just some meddling kid, but after your performance I started to wonder if somebody sent ya.”

“What’s your name, kid?” the man in the corner followed up. “Who sent you here?”

Thief sighed, exasperated. These people were doing that “talking to him” thing again. He wished he had some way to indicate that he didn’t have the faintest grasp of their language—maybe wear a sign, or a special color like the bugs do to show that they’re poisonous.

The boar's expression bristled, apparently annoyed. He plucked the cigar out of his mouth and frowned. "What're you, some kind of wiseass, kid? We asked you a question. Who sent you?"

The boy shied his gaze away from the group, unnerved by their intense looks. Whatever they wanted, he wished he could give it to them so they'd leave him alone. He didn't want to fight them again, especially now that they had the upper hand.

"This kid's not talkin'," the boar noted. He flicked a wrist at the aardvark. "Benny."

The aardvark, presumably "Benny," kicked Thief in his bandaged thigh, spreading an awful fire down his leg and back up into the pit of his stomach.

"Hello, start talking!" Benny demanded, and when there was nothing but sobbing he kicked again. 'Who are you? What were you doing back there in the stockroom?'
The boy squealed and thrashed in his bindings, tears building behind his eyelids. "Yaaaan! *Yaaaaaan!*"

The bald man grimaced with confusion. "Yan? The hell does that mean?"

"I don't understand this," the boar remarked through a ring of smoke. "Why isn't he talking?

Who the hell put him up to this?”

“Hey Riz, maybe the Albany’s sent him,” Benny piped up.

Riz, the man in the corner, wrinkled his nose incredulously. “What the hell for?”

“I dunno.” Benny shrugged. “Send us a message. You know we ain’t right with them since the last tourney.”

“Yeah, but *they* owe *us*, not the other way around,” Riz explained, “We should be the ones throwing killer kids through their windows.”

“You guys aren’t very good interrogators,” the boar grumbled around his cigar.

Benny descried the leaf of metal worn around the boy’s neck, and reached for it. “He’s got a dog tag here…”

As soon as he noticed a fuzzy, clawed hand moving towards his neck, Thief snapped at it viciously with his only handy implement: his teeth. He was thirsty and hungry and sore and in blazing pain and there were fresh red blossoms on his bandages no thanks to that bastard—like hell if he was letting “Benny” touch him again.

“Whoa!” Benny recoiled in a jump, his luckily intact hand shrinking up to his chest. “Shit, he’s really feral!”

“He musta been raised by fangs or something, like in those ‘wild boy’ books,” Riz conjectured, “That’s where he learned how to fight.”

In a rather abrupt, surreal moment, the boar exploded into laughter. “Ah, haha, ahahahaha!”

Riz took a bemused step out of his corner and towards his boss. “Uhhh, Don?”

Don’s fit eventually tapered into rough coughing. “This kid’s not a wiseass,” he declared, “He’s a dumbass.”

“Huh?” Benny scratched his ear quizzically.

“I said he’s a regular idiot! It would take one to fly in through a window and start roughin’ with my gang. Sometimes the simplest explanation is the right one, you jackasses. Don’t waste your time. He don’t know shit from his own foot.”

“So…” Riz pitched the next step, “We lettin’ him go?”

“What do *you* think?”

Riz shrugged and spoke frankly. “I just don’t know, Don. I mean, he killed Gumbo. Granted, Gumbo was a self-serving asshole, but it’s the principle of the thing. It won’t feel right to just let him go.”

“Let’s kill him, then,” Benny suggested, as if they were talking about throwing out bad fruit.

Don waved the conversation to a halt. “Wait, wait, hold your chocobos.” He cupped his chin and hummed while considering the sniffling captive. ‘We ain’t killin’ this kid.…But we ain’t lettin’ him go, either!’ A wicked epiphany crossed him, which took the shape of a sneer. “…Actually, Benny just gave me a great idea.”

“What’s that?”
“I did?”

“Yeah. I’m thinkin’ of the tourney.”

“What about the tourn… Oh!” Riz lit up, and then promptly snuffed the idea with scruples. “Oh, Don, I don’t know. Put a little kid in the tourney?”

“Why not? He ain’t much removed from any of the monsters we throw out every week. You said it yourself: he’s just a street rat. Nobody’s gonna miss him. I think he’ll be a real wild card.”

“Actually,” Benny chipped in, “I’m liking this idea. Nobody’s gonna think to place bets on a little boy. It’s ridiculous.”

“This plan would only work if the kid actually, you know, wins,” Riz pointed out, still skeptical.

“He won against you knuckleheads, and you were armed!” Don countered.

“Way to rub it in, Boss,” Benny said in a dejected aside.

“Also, I don’t see this working any more than once or twice. Once the regulars catch on, the game is over.”

Don rolled his shoulders flippantly. “Who said we’ll need the gig any more than once? Once we’re done with him, we’ll…” He pointed to the boy, floundered through an awkward pause, and then let his next words apathetically drop with his hand. “Ah, whatever. I’ll let you guys settle the score with the brat, if you want.”

The boar bowed a little to inspect his latest “gig,” who simply leered sharply at him in return.
“But, shit… If you dingleberries hadn’t just about ripped the boy’s leg off I could put him to work already.”

“But Don,” Riz objected, “You said to—”

“Shut up and go back to work.” The boar motioned his cronies out the door with his cigar, cinders splashing off its tip and searing tiny holes in the remains of the boy’s clothes. “I’ll take care of the kid.”

Benny and Riz ambled out through a groaning door crafted within the bars of the cell. The boar, left alone with the child, felt it was at last an appropriate moment to introduce himself. The boy recoiled whatever inches he could from the malignant grin that breathed stale smoke and bad meat into his personal space.

“Hello, monkey boy. My name is Don. But you’re gonna call me Boss.”

Days were slow and dull, at first.

At least, they felt like days. Monkey boy didn’t have any windows in his cell, so night and day were left to guesswork. He would limp and crawl around his confined quarters until he felt sleepy, and then wake up the next day to start the laps over. Sometimes he would lounge idly on the potato sack

he was afforded for a bed, picking cooties out of his fur and hair. Sometimes he would shuffle up the wall of bars and touch the ceiling, just because he could. Sometimes he would sit at the door and poke his arms and legs into the hall (he was right on the first glance; he couldn’t squeeze through the bars), or make random, bleating noises while he looked out and counted the lamps that marked each room like his own: all fingers and a couple of toes’ worth, including both sides of the corridor.

There were other critters around, locked away in neighboring brick pens. He could smell them right away, and his suspicions were confirmed when his calls were echoed with barks and whines. The hall shook with critter cries every time the door at the end of the hall opened and one of their human caretakers appeared.

Riz and Benny were strange providers. They visited twice a day, each time to change the bowls of water and slop in everyone’s cells (slop was a barely-palatable blend of some kind of grain, some kind of meat and some kind of water—he never quite sorted it all out, but it tasted like cat vomit). The second visit was attended by Don as well, who directed special attention towards the boy while the

pens were systematically flushed out and re-littered with fresh sawdust and straw.

Monkey didn’t like these people, first impressions prevailing. When they approached him he fought them off, tooth and nail, and they usually had to resort to exotic means to restrain him or keep him from arrowing out the door and not looking back. One of the more peculiar devices was a sturdy pole with a noose strung through its open end, and they’d use it to snare him by the neck and hold him out of reaching distance. After a few snags the boy figured out how to pry himself free, and the men would then call on their last resort: Don.

One of the hardest rules of this new, closed-off world was that Don was in charge, always. If Monkey proved too unruly for the boar’s grunts, the boss himself would intervene with his arcane staff. The power of that weapon was mystical and terrible, and the boy was never able to evade its lightning bolts. Sometimes he was dealt only a reproachful zap, and other times he was fried into unconsciousness, but in all cases the excruciating lesson was learned: stay put, don’t hurt them, and they won’t hurt him.

He was trained to sit still and pout while Riz plucked at and tended to the bandages on his leg. Every day, as the stab wound gradually healed, he could walk a little better, until finally Don put the child “to work.”

Work made the boy feel relieved every time he saw his dingy cell. When it was time for work, Monkey was herded out of his pen and into a cramped wooden crate. His cage was then loaded onto a wheeled cart alongside other critter crates and hauled out of the critter hall, through a dark passageway and into a place affectionately known as “Undertown.”

All Monkey knew of Undertown was the glimpses he captured in passing through the chicken wire of his cage door. It was a little of the horned people market, a little of the Industrial District, and mostly of soot, grime, rats, garbage and unpolished shacks along sewer tunnels and murky canals. Though several large, boxy fans pumped the outdoors into the underground plaza, a haze yet clung to the air that was dry and faintly burning, unlike the mist of the great tree’s woods. It was like a little city in the pit of a pot-bellied stove.

Monkey would occasionally see people roaming about, at times either more than a crowd or less than a ghost town. He'd sometimes spy men sulking in the shadowed niches within the rickety wooden shells of booths and lean-to sheds. He'd sometimes see people seated in a row before a bar, drinking sullenly from foaming amber mugs. He usually wouldn't see much at all until he arrived at The Coop.

The Coop was an arena of sorts: an hexagonal prism of chain-link fencing with a brick foundation and twice as much floor space as the boy's cell. A padlocked gate fashioned from the fence's wiring guarded one way in: the other was a sliding wooden hatch set in the bricks. Monkey's cage would be thrown down before the open hatch, his door facing into The Coop. Then his carrier would be pried open and sticks would jut through the slats of his cage, poking him until he scurried out and into their steel-knitted ring.

He didn't forget his first time in The Coop. He sniffed around anxiously, pawing at the malleable fencing and the sawdust strewn over the ground, drinking in the scent of old blood covered with cedar. A bright, white spotlight peeked through the wires of the container's roof and cast a shady

honeycomb grid over the floor.
He saw someone behind the gate, staring in, and recognized the red coat and nasty cigar for Don’s.

Then another cage fell into the trap door, and so entered a companion for the boy: a fang.

Monkey bristled, put out by the company and change of scenery in general. He glanced nervously to Don, who would stand out of the way and quietly, stoically puff on his cigar, and then back to the critter, which without much prompting would leap at the boy, aimed for the kill.

He ran around in panicked circles, the fang snapping at his tail, and then he’d climb the fencing, scrambling out of the critter’s jumping reach. Men outside and below would harass him with more sticks, driving him to the ground again, and then there would be nothing left but to fight back.

This became a routine. Every other day, he would be taken to The Coop and not permitted to leave until either he or a critter was incapacitated. Usually this meant beating a critter senseless, and on rare occasions, killing it. Monkey didn’t always “win,” but before he took any serious punishment Don would put the match to a shocking stop. If the boy did come out on top, he would be humanely coerced

back into his carrier and deposited in his homely cell, where an extra helping of gruel was waiting for him. If he lost, he was toted back home to lick his wounds, sans-supper. For the aforementioned rare occasions, when the boy finished the spar in a manner Don considered too extreme, he received a brutal shock *and* was deprived of his meal.

Staying in good health became a matter of honing his skills. He took hard lessons and eventually mastered the art of brawling cleanly and effectively. He learned how to reach vulnerable spots and nail them with a boxer’s speed and grace, before the blood shed was his own. The more quickly and efficiently he knocked his opponent out, the less opportunity he had to get hurt, and that was all he fought for.

As the weeks wore on, he dared consider the practice boring, each critter falling too easily. He began to play around and bring a little finesse to The Coop, testing strange and back-bending acrobatics off the walls of the arena, to the appreciative whoops and laughter of his sparse audience. Don began to up the ante, throwing in two critters at once, then three, but it was all reduced to a game. The Coop was first his horror, but then Monkey’s only source of entertainment. It was all perversely rewarding.

A mu, a fang and a flan was the game the day Don received a visitor just outside The Coop. The boar was at his preferred post, on an elevated deck observing the goings-on within the cage, when Benny raced up to him.

“You gots a visitor, Boss,” the aardvark slurred through his panting, and then ran back down to keep an eye on the kid and monsters.

Don turned, intrigued, and looked across the alley at the man turning the corner off a storm drain. “This place stinks as bad as always,” the stranger remarked as he approached, his shape coming into golden clarity as he passed beneath a lamppost. He was a black bear-type, a head taller than Don and with a strong, firm trunk. His grizzled features grew out of a comfortably loose pair of blue denim overalls. He had an easy-going, self-assured swagger and a voice like honey, rich and thick with an aged rasp.

“Tatta, my good man!” Don greeted him enthusiastically. “Did you bring me a gift?”

Tatta fished a cigar from the front pouch of his overalls and presented it to Don. “You better believe

it.”

“Ah, you’re a real sport.” Tatta stood by while Don flicked a match and sampled his gift. ‘Mmm… That’s good stuff.’ He then asked through a nasally burst of smoke, “How’re you and Baku gettin’ along? I heard you two started your own band.”

Tatta nodded. “Yeah, yeah, it’s goin’ good. We got our own theater ship not long ago, as a matter of fact.”

“Oh yeah? What’s ’er name?”

“Ah, the Prima Vista. It’s nothing spectacular, but me and the guys fixed it up good, and it gets the job done.”

Don grunted sagely. “That’s all you ever need. So, what brings you to Undertown?”

“Ah, uh, well…” Tatta scratched his nose evasively, suddenly reserved. “The airship and all is somethin’ to do with why I’m here.”

The boar narrowed his eyes. “This smells like a favor.”

“The Prima Vista a great investment, but we’re still gettin’er off the ground and all, and it’s really punched a hole in our bank this season…”

“No,” Don cut him off, waving his hand before the bear’s snout. “Forget about it. You guys take too long to pay me back, and there’s never any interest. I should’ve axed you all ages ago.”

Tatta wilted slightly and fell back on the “be reasonable” tack. “I’m not asking for your life savings, Don. We just need a couple of hundred gil to make it through the winter! Once the theater season starts up again—”

“I don’t think you’re listening,” Don came back, harsh and direct. “Did you take a good look around on the way down? All of that belongs to me. I own this shit-hole world. I own every little thing that goes on in this world. I own every little piece and penny that passes through this world, every bad player, every rotten hand and every damn cockroach that thinks it owns the place. Now, this place may be full of crooks and cheats, but they’re MY crooks and cheats, and this is a world of business. This world does not thrive without business, and luckily for it, I am a business man.”

“But Don…” the bear tried again, stooping into a pleading tone.

“Now I think I’ve done you, Baku and your band of merry men enough favors by now for it to stop

being a *favorable* proposition for me. I'm not gonna hold you guys up every time the weather changes. I've got my own boys to look after, you understand. If you want money out of me, try your luck on Friday nights like everybody else."

"Don…"

"Benny!" the boar hollered into the background, and there showed up the aardvark. "Show this man out."

Tatta reached for Don's turned back in an entreating gesture, but shortly dropped his arm, gave up on squeezing mercy from the slum lord and was dutifully escorted down to the main floor by Benny. On the way out, the aardvark and bear stopped for the overtly loud commentary issuing from the level above.

"Heh heh, I like this kid! He's got spirit!" Don pointed into The Coop, where Monkey sprang off a running start up the walls to drop a kick into the flan's face. The gelatinous monster quite imploded after having its eyes shoved out through its translucent back. "Look at the way he jumps all over the place. He's like a… flying monkey! Or somethin'. He's got that 'killer instinct.' You don't

see much of that in our youth these days. It's such a shame."

For a tentative moment, Tatta and Don's eyes met, the bear reading something crafty in the boar's smirk.

"Wouldn't you agree, Tatta?"

"…Yeah." Tatta allowed the faintest grin, and walked away.

A few days later, the usual crowd came knocking (figuratively speaking) on Monkey's door, and away they went to The Coop, though the timing seemed off. From the boy's vantage point, he had a poor sense of time, but his stomach knew when his second meal was delayed a few hours too many. It somehow felt late in the day, for whatever kind of smothered light-time and dark-time ruled this realm.

Monkey wasn't quite prepared for Undertown that night. There was something in the air that was very much more alive than usual, even when the ragged population was at its peak. The stifling, depressing atmosphere was charged with new sounds and motion: raucous laughter, music, the

drumbeat of scuffling chairs and boots all over the brick alleys and wooden planks that bridged the putrid ditches, and people that swayed from one place to the next as if they actually had somewhere to go. The stinging smoke Don liked so much was especially prevalent, like smog, and the boy had to rub his watering eyes every few blinks.

Monkey flinched when a man plunged through the window of a shoddily boarded tavern and landed in a glittering heap next to his cart. A chorus of laughter and cracking shouts filtered through the busted opening, towards which the guy turned and stood up. He combed the broken glass out of his hair and lumbered back in through the door, taking time to shove a retching man by the entrance into the puddle of his own vomit.

The critter cart leisurely rolled along until Monkey arrived at The Coop and was unloaded before the critter hatch, curiously alone. Why was he by himself? He couldn’t spy a fellow critter cage, which left him wondering what he could be possibly brought here to fight.

The bleachers around The Coop looked different, as well; there were actually people filling them. A handful, at first, but then more and more trickled in

from the many dark corners and settled in along the tiered benches, which were of the same makeshift consistency as the shacks Monkey passed on the way there.

Across the hall, a bar was lit up that he hadn't even noticed before, and the stools and tables branching away from it were stuffed with patrons.

At one of the smaller, round tables a lean, towering, muscular black bear and a young man with a similar, if shorter build sat together. The man's slightly tanned, bare arms were streaked with blue ink from his balled shoulders to his gloved hands. He wore a bandana upon his sloping skull and chewed a yellowed reed in his stout underbite. The bear was laughing in his greyed, honey-rich voice as another person hoisted a pair of crystal mugs to the table and slid onto a third stool. The newcomer was a child of a man, with a simple human face and a leather headband reeling back wild tufts of red hair.

"There you go, two mugs, one for each a'ya," the kid announced as he shoved his delivery across the table. "When am I gonna be able to drink beer with you guys?"

The bear grinned condescendingly. “When you grow up, kiddo.”

The kid puffed up, indignant. “Like ’ell I’m not grown up! I can swear and spit and come down to seedy little piss-holes like this one, but I can’t have a lick of the booze. This is hy…” He hesitated, testing a new word, “…hyp-o-critical.”

The two men chuckled and sipped from their mugs. “Ooo, the rookie’s usin’ big words!” the bear playfully snapped back, ‘Look, you’ll be grown up just as soon as you can look Baku in the eye and tell him you’ve come with us to Undertown without gettin’ your little hide tanned.’ He then turned the bottom of his drink up, guzzled it, and slammed the glass down with a dramatic flair and a satisfied smack of the lips. “…Now go refill my beer.”

“Ach. This is the last I’m buyin’, though…” the kid grumbled. He took up the empty mug and hopped away.

“Hey Blank,” the tattooed man yelled after him, “Check the time while you’re over there.”

“Yeah, yeah…” Blank waved a dismissive hand over his shoulder as he disappeared into the crowd.

The bear tossed a glance towards the arena. “Huh, looks like they’re gettin’ The Coop ready. It’s startin’ soon.”

“Hmm?” his companion grunted.

“Every once in a while Don lets idiots from all over step into The Coop and get the shit beat out of them by monsters he imports from Pinnacle Rocks. If they win, they get a lil’ reward. But on Friday nights, it’s special. It’s all man-on-man, a real fightin’ tourney. People can come watch and place bets on the participants. When it’s all over, only one man’ll walk away with the grand prize, and Don rakes in from the pool.”

“Sounds beautiful,” the neanderthal remarked ironically, and then put down his mug and belched. “Is that why we’re here tonight?”

“Sharp as ever, Marcus.”

Blank returned with a full mug and a report. “It’s almost nine o’clock.”

“Ahh, should be startin’ any minute then.” The bear picked up his drink and stood. “Let’s go get some seats right in close on the action.”

“Uhh, Tatta?” Marcus spoke up, “We actually gettin’ in on this? You know we’re piss broke.”

“It’s okay, I know what I’m doin’. Hey Marcus…” The bear handed him a purse laden with coins. “Take this. Go over and look at tonight’s roster, and if you see anyone with a name like ‘flying monkey’ or ‘killer monkey’ or somethin’ like that, put this all on him.”

Marcus accepted the purse warily, taking a peek inside. “Whoa… this looks like a few hundred. Where’d you get this much gil?” He jerked an alarmed look onto the bear. “Oh shit, you didn’t…”

“Are you gonna question me all night or are you gonna go do what I say before the bets close?” the bear pressed him.
Marcus shook his head. “This ain’t cool, Tatta.”

“Marcus…” Tatta leveled an earnest, authoritative leer with the smaller man. “Just do it.”

Marcus took a tall breath, held it, and opened his mouth as if to challenge, but then he clenched his jaw shut, let the wind go through his nose and stalked off to do the bear’s bidding.

“Tatta,” Blank asked in a frenzy once Marcus was out of earshot, “Izzat our war chest?! Boss is gonna

piss himself mad if you gamble away our bank! And then what’re we gonna live on this winter?”

The bear cracked an encouraging smile, patted him roughly on the back and guided him towards the bleachers. “Relax, kiddo, it’s gonna be all right.”

Nothing happened for a disconcerting while. Monkey curled up in his cage and waited for his summons while watching the decadent carnival outside with a half-interested eye. He wanted to hurry and beat something up; the sooner he did, the sooner he could go back to his safe, quiet pen and eat supper. Too many people around made him nervous.

To pass the time he kept track of a phenomenon he hadn’t paid much notice to before. People would walk up to a booth, speak with a man behind the counter, and then walk away with some good in hand. He’d long ago presumed that the reason this process never worked for him was that he couldn’t talk, else he would have saved himself tons of trouble with thievery.

It was not until he trained an eye on a man strolling about with a basket of rice balls that the key

to the process became clear. The people weren't just talking; they were trading. What typically went too high and unseen for the boy's own good were the shiny metal coins the good-wanter passed to the good-giver. People were giving the man with the load of paper balls tokens, and he would give them one of his treats in return, which the purchaser would unwrap and munch on.

Food for coins.

The astoundingly obvious occurred to him, and he finally understood. Like the door and its knob, everyone had to do things the long, stupid way, even when it came to food. What if *he* had some coins…?

He fingered his necklace, its token a little too square and too thin for currency. Those round, shiny rock leaves were so precious to everyone… and yet his was worthless to them. Why? What was the big difference? What made the coins so special?

A bellowing gong directed his attention to the middle of The Coop, where a man stood with outstretched, welcoming arms. The audience stilled to hear him talk in fast, excited notes. He wrapped up his brief speech with a dragging, loud call, and the assembled cheered and roared in response.

Something important had begun.

It happened again and again, each time with different players, yet in the same ring and with the same outcome. Two men would enter the enclosure, have the gate locked behind them and, at the prompting of another gong, beat each other up. Each round was a symphony of jingling wires, colliding meat, blood splattering against the deck and the pounding, clapping feet of an exuberant audience, who almost seemed more riled up than the combatants.

It was incredibly surreal to be watching from the sidelines for a change. Monkey would, from his detached perch, witness two human beings hurting each other for no discernable reason at all. He wondered how well the winner was fed after each match was over.
A fight was over when a man fell down and didn't get up. Some of Don's regular goons would step into The Coop to show the victor and his victim out, and after a brief intermission another round ensued.

Just when Monkey was wondering for the fifth time why he was bothered with the ruckus, his carrier rattled as with displacement. He realized with a dawning sense of doom that he was being lowered

to the critter hatch. Despite the sinking feeling against entering the ring, once the way was open he didn't resist long enough to taste the invasive prods that would coax him out of his cage anyway.

At first, it must have been a joke. People were laughing, after all. He stood in the middle of that familiar death-hole, what felt like a hundred eyes on him, their owners roaring with either mirth or disappointed anger or some kind of rejecting disbelief and he could FEEL their staring oh his knees were shaking why was this different don't move don't breathe don't hurt humans that's the rule ack—did someone just spit on him?

A piece of popcorn bounced off his shoulder and landed daintily at his feet. He bent to sniff and taste it, but then the gate unlocked and his game entered.

Even if he could speak, Monkey wouldn't be able to say later what his first opponent looked like, aside from not being a critter. He'd remember the trepidation that iced his sweat as his mind struggled against protocol—what to do if a human touched him verses what he'd seen happen all night—then there was the gong—and that first blow, right across his cheek, blazing and deliberate—he'd remember crumpling to the ground and taking that next kick,

and crying something *oh yan stop*—and his belligerent would laugh, the sound deep and ripping —and he'd remember looking up and out, at Don, at the boss in his lofty throne—whatever Boss wanted —this was *his* jungle and *his* rules and he didn't want to get zapped or beat on any more what was he supposed to *do??*

Don didn't get up. He just looked right over the crowd—at the boy—with those beady, piercing eyes —and nodded.

That was all the permission Monkey ever needed.

He remembered standing back up, glowering at his opponent, tears yet welling in his eyes, and shutting that man right up in the face.

He wouldn't be able to call to mind the appearance of the second, third or fourth man, either, but he remembered how each fell.
He remembered each seeming bigger and tougher than the last, until his tricks didn't mean anything but lasting another second in the ring and getting his reprieve in his carrier.
He remembered the way the chain-links shivered when he was thrown against the wall, and the ponderous, tidal thuds as grown men collapsed like rag dolls beneath him.

He remembered the rush of acting out every brash, vindictive thought he'd ever harbored against mankind, actualizing his resentment with slicing, deep punches. He remembered the thrill of bloodshed from something that could laugh and cry as well as scream.
He remembered the crowd raging like his heart and it was the most terrifying experience ever and he liked it—they were nothing but critters—all of them—every single damn one, laughing and crying and hurting and howling and stuffing their faces while he was hungry and he'd shut them all up he'd SHUT THEM *ALL UP*

And, by the storms and the thunder and all the dark things, he *liked* it.

There was something anticlimactic about returning to his quiet, lonely cell at the end of the night. Monkey was still a little worked up, his tense muscles not ready to accept that the tournament was over and he could safely crash. Once he hit that musty, straw floor, though, sleep became the most natural idea.

His caretakers seemed to be in high spirits, raving and staggering through the halls, bottles in their hands. It took an offhanded remark from Don to spur one of them to dish out the boy's supper.
"Har, har! That kid won me a lot of money tonight. Throw a chicken leg in there with his mush, would'ja?"

Riz fumbled open the door to Monkey's pen and did as he was ordered, minus the chicken leg, though Monkey didn't know any better. The boy languidly peeled himself off his potato sack and slurped down another bowl of slop, strangely too tired to eat and too hungry to not. He licked up the last grueling lumps like a chore, turning the bowl around on his tongue like a ship wheel, and only when the last drop was his did he peer over the rim of the container and notice what was radically amiss.

The door was left open.

Monkey blinked, amazed at the turn of fortune. When he stuck a nose out into the hall, it was void of man or demi—even the critters were at dozing, lazy attention in their respective pens. The loudest noise to reach his ears was his own pulse as the boy stepped out of his secure dwelling and into the world only humans were allowed to tread.

For the first time since his landfall in people city he felt like one of the critters. The beasts to his left and right were so acclimatized to his presence that they didn't stir or whine, even for envy of his freedom.

At least, not until he opened the hall door. It was an oafish obstacle that wouldn't budge until he propped his feet against its frame and tugged on the handle for all his worth. It finally popped ajar with a squealing clamor that sparked bad recognition in all the critters that heard it, which was… well, all the critters. Monkey had enough sense to know that if he didn't get off his rear fast and go *somewhere else*, people were going to hear that something was up in the critter hall, what-with all the barking and roaring.

He slipped like a rat on fire out the door and into the dark beyond. He had a good idea of how to get to Undertown, but from there, where? He had to go far away, as far away as he could go. He was suddenly brimming with the desperate, scratching hope of seeing again a place left behind, a place more like home than he presently knew.

It was different to stand in this passage alone, without the noisy shuddering of his cart to mask the

screeching monsters left behind and faint dripping from drainpipes poised above the canal on the left side. If not for the slab of light at the end of the tunnel, Monkey wouldn't be able to see a thing. He ran along the dim brick sidewalk, stubbing his toes once or twice, but with a hissing wince and a hop he fell back into pace each time. As he neared that light, which peered out from an open door in the wall, he overheard talk and laughter. Then, just as the boy was about to pass it by, a man stepped into view.

"The hell's that racket?" he asked in the direction of the critter hall.

It was Riz. Monkey skidded to a stop before him, his hackles raised in alarm and the bottom of this throat roiling with a feline's growl. The man was leaning on the edge of the door and straining to focus a half-lidded gaze down the corridor. It seemed to take a moment for him to make out the boy's shape amongst the seeping shadows.

"Huh? What're you doing out here?" he wondered out of pure confusion. A second later, the implications sobered him straight up. "Oh, shit. Benny, Benny!"

An obscured, "What?" was thrown back.

“The monkey’s out!”

“What?”

“I said the monkey’s loose! Quick, get Don!”

“ohshit,” was the last Monkey heard of Benny, and then tapering footsteps.

Monkey was staring Riz down. If he had to, he could get by the man, but for a petrifying moment he heard Don’s name, and if the boss and his staff showed up…

Riz bent into a slouch, trying to level with the boy, and began inching towards him, palms outstretched in a peacemaking gesture. “Okay, little guy… Just stay right there and don’t run away. Er, I mean, let’s go right back to your bed, okay? Your nice, warm—oh oh Ah!”

The man’s speech was interrupted when Monkey tried to sprint past him. Riz reached out and snagged a clump of the boy’s hair, reeling him back, but the boy’s answer to that was to clasp the tall fellow’s arm and spin him around until he lost his balance and fell into the ditch—it didn’t take much. The boy was already on the run again before the splash ebbed. He didn’t have time to listen to Riz’s bullshit; this was his best shot at leaving Undertown, and the

boss was probably already on his way to make sure that wasn't so.

He was coming up on a wide bridge. The sidewalk took a vanishing right corner just before it. All he had to do was keep straight ahead, and the heart of Undertown would become his haven. And then, and then…

A dark blob sailed into the path from around the corner and squared itself in the boy's way. The border of its silhouette was red and glossy with torchlight from across the bridge, and in the pitch shadows of its face an ember spot flared and faded ominously, as with seething breaths.

"What're you doin' out here, monkey?" It was Don. He reached into his jacket for that dreaded magic staff. Monkey crouched low, wary of the next move, and gulped. This was what he was afraid of.

If he retreated, he might make it to his cell without any serious repercussions.
If he retreated, he might lose his chance to ever see the light of day again.

The boy gritted his teeth and stood firmly on all fours, a battle stance. His tail slashed the heavy air nervously, but that was his only betraying

movement. His eyes were dead-locked on that beast in his way.

Don advanced one step, staff held out threateningly. “You better turn around and get back in your cage, boy. I don’t want to have to hurt you to make that clear.”

Don’t move don’t move don’t fall back… His respiration quickened. He felt like he was standing in The Coop again. He felt like he could do anything and yet not get anything done.

Don moved in closer. “I said turn around and get goin’, monkey boy.”
Monkey didn’t budge.

The boar gave a humming growl and flicked the staff forward. It crackled and shot a piece of storm at the boy, tossing him back into a steaming heap. The world flashed white and buzzing with that familiar pain, and when he opened his eyes he was on his back, a little fuzzy-eyed but otherwise intact. It was strange how numb he felt as the boy pulled himself up and set his uncompromising glare on the boss again.

Don glowered at him. “I said move it, boy.” He tapped into that magic again, conjuring a bolt that

splintered the bricks at the boy's feet, but Monkey sprang to dodge, the flakes of the spell licking his heels.

The boar swiped again, vexed by the miss, though it seemed more with each shot that the thunder spell was rolling off the kid's back, or—perhaps more impressively—being absorbed, the child's tattered clothing and hair taking on an ethereal sheen.

Monkey felt invincible, the light glaring and hot and not touching him. He could *wear* the lightning like a coat and it wouldn't matter, not one bit—he didn't feel a thing, even as he jumped around like a cat between bolts. He could hardly sense the ground beneath him, much less say he missed it as he flew through the rippling ozone and landed a stiff kick to the boar's throat.

They were then falling back, magnesium sparks littering their wake, and it was the tourney all over again with the blurry snapshots of flying fur and leaking crimson and the kid took that staff right up off the ground where Don dropped it—he didn't know how to use it, so he gave it back to the boar—over and over and over right between the beady eyes until the screaming stopped and the floor at his toes felt wet and sticky—that was his first returning

sensation, actually, and it spooked him more than the shadowy things that howled in his dreams—

“Don?”
“Don! What the—?”

Benny and Riz were coming. He had to get out.

The boy moved his legs as fast as he could stand, left whatever might have been Don or not behind and dashed into town, the world still washed in bleach and quivering. He felt so tingly with power, it was intoxicating with a side of scary and where was the exit oh he didn’t know where he was going—people just stared—more eyes more dirty humans with the red eyes like the fangs that snuck up on you in the night and tried to tear your throat out—he didn’t feel like himself anymore, what had happened to him?

He crawled into a concrete covert that was… sort of dry and snaked through the slum’s plumbing until he was standing in another wide, arched passage. A shaft of night-light exposed a wavering moon off the surface of a ditch, which the boy jumped in to cross. He waded up to the far wall, found little holds in the patchwork masonry for his little fingers and toes, and he climbed like the spider up to a slit in the ceiling. He wiggled through the narrow breach and

tasted the fresh, crisp air of the jungle-city above ground. He couldn’t have been more relieved to be sitting in a gutter ever.

Yet trembling at the thought of pursuers, he continued down the street until his supernatural rush dissipated and he couldn’t run another step. He settled on the edge of a fountain and surveyed his whereabouts.

It was the same business, all shut-up and sleeping, with only lanterns keeping watch. He could crane his neck skyward and behold the moons at their apex, engulfed in a sea of stars. Far away and looming, the clock-faced mountain chimed a small hour. The boy shivered. He couldn’t believe how much time must have passed unawares; a chill breeze was heralding cold time already.

When he looked down, there he was, sharing the fountain pool’s reflection with a lamppost. He studied his image, noting the ratty, sandy hair smeared with coal and the muddy rags that clung to his bony ribs and shoulders, glued to the skin with wet sewage and blood. So much blood… Shaking hands clutched the cement ridge of the fountain as the boy cringed all over, and then cracked with sobs.

The tears started coming, drips at first and then trickles, and he couldn’t hold in any more pain.

He wailed bitterly and slapped the pool in a wild tantrum, hating that thing he saw inside it and wanting it to die. He kept thrashing and stomping through the shallow water, bidding that reflection never come back. When he couldn’t hold himself up any longer the boy sank to his knees, his crying making little difference to the fountain.

The nearing sound of voices, loud and free with revelry, startled the boy into hiding. He pressed himself to the bottom of the pool, completely immersing himself. He didn’t want to see another human again. The boy just lay still, listlessly watching rusty plumes of blood and scum stream off his person and cloud the cold water.

“One—*thousand*—gil!”
“Ahahaha!”

There were lots of small coins keeping him company down there. The fountain could keep them, for all he cared now. Once again he wondered what it would be like to just… take it all in… and let the water fill him.

“I can’t believe it! It was amazing!”
“I told you boys!”

Would it hurt? How long would he last? How soon would it be over, so he could sleep in the nice, cold dark, forever and ever… nothing would hurt anymore. The killing would stop. He didn’t want to kill any more—he didn’t want to live any more—he didn’t see the point.

“I gotta admit, Tatta, I thought you’d lost your damn mind!”
“It was awesome! Did you see the way he just kicked that guy right in the nose? Bam!”
“Haha.”
“We’d done quadrupled—no, the next thing after that… five times…?”
“Uh…”
“Oh hell, I don’t know the word for it, but we got a thousand gil now! Boss is gonna flip out.”

All he had to do was close his eyes… and breathe…

“I told you boys I knew what I was doin’! Now when Baku sees what we brought in he’ll be too hyped over the money to stay mad about how we got it. It’s the perfect gig, I tell you what.”
“Heheheh!”

“Whoa, what’s up with that fountain? The water’s all red.” Is that blood? “” Hoo damn, there’s a body in it!”

He was very rudely jarred from his dream when a big hand took the scruff of his shirt and yanked him out of the water. Monkey weakly protested the interruption with squirming and kicking that segued into violent coughing and retching. All the while a steady grip was on his collar and a broad palm was patting him roughly on the back.

Once he’d purged the bad water from his lungs the kid wearily sat up, panting for his life and taking a moment for his vision to clear. Three people stood closely over him, engaged in some kind of discourse.

“Well, thank the heavens he’s still alive. If we’d’a shown up a minute later he’d’a probably drowned.”
“I don’t see a lot of cuts or nothin’ on him. I think he’ll be okay.”
“Hey guys, isn’t this the Flying Monkey?”

Monkey blinked at the lot: a man with a blunt jaw and a bandana on his head, a black bear, and a childish figure with spiky, red hair. A knot tied in his chest at the thought that Don could’ve sent them to find him.

“That don’t sound right. What would he be doin’ out here like this?” the bandana-clad one wondered.
“But it looks just like ’im. I wouldn’t forget that monkey-tail for anything,” affirmed the kid.
The bear rubbed his nose contemplatively. “…Heh, I’ll be damned.”

The bigger human was first to look him in the eye and direct a query to him. “You okay, kid?”

“Hey there, kid,” the bear rang in next. “You all right?”

Oh no, they wanted him to answer. What could he do? If he didn’t say something, they were probably going to get mad. None of these people sounded angry… but they were crowding him and he would sooner go back to drowning than confront this group, whatever their intentions.

“Hey! Say somethin’,” the red-haired kid insisted.

Monkey began searching for a way out. The nearest person was the big, orge-jawed human, who had thankfully released his hold on the boy. If he had some way to get a head start, then…

“Look at ’im; he’s still in shock,” the bear assumed.

…What was that at the man’s belt? The boy could spy traces of shiny through a rent in a heavy pouch—coins. The nape of the purse was barely secured against the man’s waist, and with one good tug…

Monkey dove under the man’s arm, plucked free the bag and then kicked off the human’s side in four lightning-quick strokes that sent his victim stumbling over backwards into the pool. The man’s two comrades scrambled to pull him out, and by the time all were oriented again the monkey-boy was already well away.

Marcus sputtered and shook damp loads off his arms and vest. “God damn!” he cursed. “Did you see that? He pushed me right in! Crazy little shit.”

“Where’d he go?” Blank asked of the subject, scanning the dark neighborhood for sign or tail of him.

“Ran off into the night, looks like,” Tatta surmised. “Heh, that’s gratitude for ya. We only saved his life.”

“Whatever, let’s just head back to the hideout,” Marcus grumbled. He stood and collected himself, checking over his soaked clothes. He reached to his

side, which had been relieved of a considerable weight. Finding nothing of note, he padded his hands thoroughly around the length of his belt, fast becoming desperate to locate what should have been there.

“Oh, shit.”

The others, who had already started on their way, turned back to see Marcus frantically searching himself. “What’s wrong?” Tatta asked.

The tattooed man shrugged haplessly. “Guys, I… The money’s gone.”

“What!” Blank shrieked.
Tatta marched up and examined his companion, seeing that it was so. “Where’d it go!” he enquired, voice growing harsh.

“Guys, look!” Blank pointed to the ground, where a mess of coins trailed off into the gutters.

“I, I…” Marcus stammered, about to utter the unspeakable, “I think the monkey took it.”

Tatta looked from the spilled gil to his drenched companion to the black, quiet alleys encompassing them, and growled with mixed disbelief and outrage.

“Oh hell no.”

Monkey's first priority was to find home. Once he got a sense of which street he was on, it wasn't hard to track down his old, favorite alley. The sight of the wrinkled-wet cardboard mat and the faded chalk scribbles on the wall just where he left them was enough to banish suicidal thoughts and put him in his place again. He stole a dry, clean shirt—the only thing left out on the clotheslines that night—and settled in again.

Come morning, he was rested and eager. He'd never had money to spend before, and he wanted to test the system. As soon as the bakery across the street opened, he took a handful of coins from the purse he stole and went to see what he could do.
Monkey winged the "talking" part of the deal, mostly relying on pointing and grunting hungrily. The baker reluctantly took his coins in exchange for a loaf of cheese bread and then swept the boy out before he got grubbing crumbs all over the floor.

It was great; he figured he could eat whenever he felt hungry, now, instead of waiting for dumpster pickings. He roamed the streets with a carefree bounce to his gait, getting the feel of real street life again. It was nice to be back on familiar turf, though he wished he could have stuck around for the last of

the warm time. It was cool time already, and soon turning cold, especially after dark. He fancied his body was having a difficult time adjusting to the chilly, drier surroundings, since he started waking up mornings feeling icky and hot-skinned.

It was a big city, and thusly he rarely saw the same person twice on his excursions. This made his frequent encounters with the gang he'd first met at the fountain doubly suspicious. He bumped into one of the three at odd times of the day, at different parts of the city, at least five times over the course of two days. He imagined their resentment over the money he took and hastened away before he was caught. It was starting to become amusing, the way they kept chasing as if they were faster or more agile than he.

On the third day, he was out spooking pigeons when he spotted a trail of popcorn in the road…

"You gambled away our war chest?"

Crouched upon crates and behind dumpsters in a tucked-away, dead-end alley were Tatta, Blank, Marcus and a fourth member of the party, who was being briefed on the situation and why he was dragged forth to help.

“We didn’t gamble it away!” Tatta exclaimed, “We won, damnit! And then the damn kid we won the money off of up and took it from us!”

The fourth fellow was a plump, squat man with chicken legs and a thread of facial hair framing his balled cheeks and bulbous, rubicund nose. If not for the pointed ears and sunken, white eyes hiding under the brim of his hat, he’d pass for a purebred human. His entire body wobbled as he shook his head. “The boss isn’t going to believe that! Hell, I don’t even believe that! Can’t you just ’fess up and say you lost?”

“We didn’t lose!” the other three exploded at him, and he cringed. Tatta appended in a relatively more civilized tone, “And when we hunt down this motherfucking kid we’ll prove it to you!”

“Cinna, we just need you to help us catch him,” Marcus explained.

“What exactly do you plan to do with him when you catch him?” Cinna asked.

“Easy.” Tatta held up a demonstrative claw. “We’ll corner ’im so he can’t escape and demand our money back.”

“Um… What if he don’t speak the language?” weakly offered the lookout at the mouth of the alley.

Tatta turned a bemused smirk towards Blank. “What’choo talkin’ about, rookie?”

“I-I just mean,” Blank began timidly, “He didn’t look like he understood us back there the other night. Maybe he don’t speak standard, like those immigrants from the outbounds. If we can’t communicate with him, how’re we gonna ask for our money?”

“We’ll get our meanin’ across one way or another,” the bear affirmed, “That brat knows what he did. If he don’t wanna hand the gil over, we’ll take out our good old fashioned whoopass sticks and beat ’im until he comes to his senses.”

“What if he don’t have it any more? What if he spent it?”

“How’s a street rat gonna spend five hundred gil in two days?” Tatta snapped, growing irritated with the kid’s doubts. “He’s got our money somewhere.”

“I’m just sayin’, what if he don’t anymore?” Blank pressed.

“Then we’ll take him back to Don. I got a feeling he’ll make a handsome bargaining chip. Either way, we’re getting our damn money back.”

“Okay, okay,” Cinna broke in, “So what’s the plan? And why does it need my good popcorn? I was gonna eat that!”

“It’s for the greater good,” Marcus assured him.

“We can’t run ’im down, so we’re gonna lure the boy in,” Tatta elaborated, “He won’t have any place to run once we’ve got him surrounded.”

The skeptical voice sounded from the corner again. “You guys sure we can take him? You saw those fights. He’s pretty good.”

“He can’t take all of us at once,” Marcus reasoned, “He’s not even armed. We have the advantage.”

The bear glanced back to the lookout. “Rookie, you sure you saw the monkey comin’ along this road?”

“Oh!” Blank chirped and ducked behind a trash can. “Here he comes!”

Everyone took to stealth-mode, hiding wherever they could. “I guess that’s a yes,” Cinna mumbled.

“Oh,” Tatta started, took a piece of food from his pocket and placed it at the end of the trail of popcorn. “Almost forgot to set out the big bait.”

Marcus, sitting across from the bear, stared at the slender, yellow fruit with a pinch of incredulous disdain. “A banana, Tatta?”

“What?” returned the bear, defensively.

“Isn’t that laying it on a little thick?”

“Just shut yo’ mouth, boy, and wait ’til he gets here.”

“Bananas are rich in potassium, you know,” Cinna commented.

“I said shut yo’ mouths!” Tatta hissed. “If he hears y’all, it’s all over!”

Everyone was patiently quiet and still when their quarry appeared in the street before their alley, sniffing along a conspicuously linear trail of popcorn. Monkey warily followed the puffy morsels into the sheltered pass until he arrived at the banana. His tail ticked curiously while he considered it, and after a moment of held breath, the boy picked up the treat and sat down to give it a tactile inspection.

Marcus sprang the trap, leaping out from behind his trash can and planting himself behind the boy with a roaring cry. Cinna meanwhile jumped out in front of Monkey, a hammer bared in one hand. “Ha!”

The abrupt scare clicked on Monkey’s fighting reflexes. He fell back onto his hands and thrust his heels high and forward, connecting with the squat man’s chin and sending Cinna reeling back. Monkey then flipped right-side-up and threw himself beneath Marcus’s legs as the big man was leaning forward to grab him. The child climbed up Marcus’s back, mounted his shoulders and began drumming on his skull with little furious fists.

“Ahhhhhhh get him off get him off!” that tattooed man hollered and skipped around in wild circles, swinging his arms around the back of his head in a futile attempt to swat the kid down.

Cinna clambered back to his feet and stepped up to bat. Marcus paused at his comrade’s claim of, “Hold on, I got ’im!” and the short man swung his hammer down fast, landing a blow exactly where… the kid was, before he’d intuitively dropped off Marcus’s shoulders. The big guy took the hit with a dizzy grunt and collapsed face-first into the trash.

Monkey was making a dash for the street, only Blank remaining in the way. The rookie valiantly held himself in the middle of the alley, arms outstretched to block his prey, but Blank wasn't braced for the charging head butt that threw him to the ground. The spry child bounced a handstand off Blank's floored gut and somersaulted into the clear. Monkey was then gone, a banana secured in the grip of his tail.

A defeated quiet settled into the alley. Marcus rolled over, rubbing his bruised neck. "Ugh… what? What happened?" he groaned, his wits yet fuzzy.

He looked straight up into a bear's frowning visage. "You boys just got yo' asses handed to ya."

Cinna turned to Marcus, fuming. "'He can't take all of us at once,' you said. 'He's not even armed,' you said."

"Grr, shut up," Marcus growled and staggered to his feet.

"Tatta," Blank asked as he sat up, still wide-eyed and winded, "Why didn't you help us?"

"Because I was the only one not stupid enough to pick a fight with somebody I just watched beat a bunch of professional brawlers the other night," the

bear rebuked the lot. “As soon as Cinna took it to the chin I knew we were out of our league, little kid or not. Now you knuckleheads git up and pull yourselves together. Obviously brute force ain’t gonna work with catchin’ this kid. We’re gonna need a different tactic.”

“You guys suck,” Cinna whined. He walked away, declaring, “I’m gonna go eat the popcorn the kid missed.”

An eruption of rustling feathers and coos answered Cinna’s plaintive wail a moment later.

“No! Pigeons!”

Another time, another alley, another trap. This time the “big bait” consisted of the leftover coins the guys had salvaged from the fountain, with more popcorn leading up to it.

“You guys are gonna owe me a lot of popcorn after this. So explain to me how this’s gonna work.”

Tatta launched into an explanation. “This is an old goblin trap. Goblins love shiny things, y’see? So you punch in one end of a tin can, knot a rope onto the other end, and drop a piece of gil inside.” He

indicated the rope he was holding that flowed up into the tail of their tin can, which they'd positioned at the mouth of the alley. "When the goblin comes up to the can, it'll see the piece and stick its hand in to get it. The trick is, once it closes its hand around the piece, it won't be able to pull it back out! Its fist won't fit back through the hole you punched in. You hold down the rope so he can't get away, and then you run out and grab 'im."

Marcus, ever critical, remarked, "You're aware that this isn't a goblin, right? This is, uh, a kid."

"Same principle!" Tatta squeaked. "Watch, it'll work. Once the monkey's got his hand stuck in that can, the rookie'll jump out with the net." He again pointed the can's way, where Blank stood in hiding atop a crate, the net in question draped over his form.

"Shh!" the net chided the others. "Here he comes." Again, everyone took cover.

Surely enough, the Monkey appeared, following the interspersed gil and popcorn. He was collecting the coins into one hand, up until the can. The child picked up the can, examining it thoroughly, and then spotted the coin within. Without a thought Monkey

tipped the can and shook it until the coin dropped out into his gathered pile.

The group stared with flat expressions at the outcome.

Marcus turned a slow look to Tatta. “You didn’t really consider that, did you?” he whispered.

The bear scrunched up his lip in a grimace. “No, can’t say I did. The goblins never pulled that one.”

“Thanks a lot, Tatta,” Cinna berated him, “Now he has the rest of our money.”

“Grr, damnit.” The bear, still seeing a chance to capture, jumped up and shouted the order. “Blank, quick!”

Blank threw the net out with a flourish, aiming it right on top of Monkey’s head. At the peak of its ascent a stiff autumn breeze caught the laced cords and pushed it aside.

Monkey watched the net roll away down the street like a tumbleweed, a little stunned by the botched ambush.

“Oh, nuts,” Blank said after it.

Monkey began to laugh. A lot. He then turned and strolled away, waving into the alley behind him.

Cinna turned red. “He’s fucking with us! He’s fucking with us…!”

Tatta held Cinna back before the portly man ran out after the kid. “Get a grip, boy! Rushing out there like a damn fool ain’t gonna fix nothin’. We already tried that, remember?”

Blank hopped down from his crate and plodded up to the others, discouraged. “Guys, this is bad. Any day now Boss is going to look into the war chest and see we don’t got no money! A hundred gil just doesn’t get up and walk away! He’s gonna know we took it!”

Cinna shrugged. “Maybe we can say we took the money to get cleaned. You know, like a suit.”

Marcus gaped at the suggestion and promptly smacked Cinna upside the head.

Tatta snorted sardonically. “Yeah, we got cleaned out, all right. By a fuckin’ kid.”

“Oh, this is bad bad bad,” Blank started again. “Maybe we should just give up and come clean to Boss. He can’t stay mad forever, can he?”

“What!” Tatta flared at the rookie. “No way in hell. What’s our rule number one?”

“But Tatta—”

Blank’s objection was stamped out with a yell. “I said what’s our rule number one, boy?”

The redhead locked up, stunted by the abrasive tone, and then recited resignedly, “…‘A Tantalus always gets what he sets his eyes on.’”

“Thaaat’s right.” The bear nodded. “Now we ain’t quittin’ ’til we get what’s ours.”

“We need a trap that’s actually gonna work, guys,” Marcus spoke.

“Oh!” Cinna lit up. “What about that thing I hear mu trappers do, where they dig a hole in the ground, cover it up, and then put some bait on top! So when the kid comes by and picks up the bait he’ll fall in the hole!”

Marcus got up, strode a ways out onto the heavily paved avenue, walked back to Cinna and smacked his ear again. “We’re not trying another stupid trapping trick.”

Tatta offered forth a paw to snag the group’s attention. “Actually, I have somethin’ that just might

work…”

“Where did you get a barrel? And *another* banana?”

Cinna boggled at the setup. It was the same as the last one, only a new alley, a banana instead of a tin can, and a barrel instead of a net.

“The shipyards always throws things like this out back,” Tatta explained.

Cinna’s brow furrowed quizzically. “The shipyards grow bananas?”

“Don’t be a fool.” Tatta rallied everyone together. “Okay, team. Take your places. Don’t make a move or a sound ’til we got ’im. Same drill as last time.”

“This isn’t gonna work; he’s gettin’ smart to us,” Blank complained.

“Quiet, decoy,” the bear put him down again. “Now get ready. He’ll be comin’ this way any minute.”

Blank pouted, but did as he was told. He crawled into an open barrel that was posted at the head of the

alley. Marcus took another barrel, squatted upon a spot just opposite Blank's, and slipped the camouflage over his head. The two sentries posed as barrels, the banana resting between them, while they lied in wait.
The other two slipped into the alley and stood at their concealed watch.

It was some kind of clockwork. Monkey came along, hot on another popcorn trail. Once again, he found a banana waiting for him at the end. "Hehehe," he tittered, took a seat on the ground, and unpeeled his snack.

"I can't believe he keeps falling for this," Tatta remarked in hushed tones.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say he's falling for our bait on purpose," Cinna observed.

"Cheeky little bastard," the bear grumbled. He nodded confidently to his cohort. "Well, pride's gonna come before the fall, this time. We'll get 'im."

Blank triggered the trap this time, springing out of the top of his barrel like a jack-in-the-box. Monkey spun to face him, alarmed yet ready, but not for the barrel behind him that popped up and slammed down over the kid.

“Woo hoo!” Marcus whooped, elated, and the others rushed out to claim a piece of victory. “Got you now, you little sucker!” he taunted the thrashing little body trapped in the barrel.

“It worked!” Blank cried, as if it were too much to believe.
“Hahaha!” Tatta cackled. “I knew this would work! Wha’d I tell you boys?”

Cinna stepped up, the barrel’s lid in hand. “Uh, guys, we gotta slap this on. You know, so he don’t get out when we move the barrel.”

“Right, right.” The bear moved to the barrel’s side, sharing a grip with Marcus. ‘On three,’ the bear instructed, “Gotta do this real quick, or he’ll get loose.” Marcus and Cinna nodded, and Blank stood back, giving them room.

“One… two… three!”

Marcus and Tatta flopped the barrel onto its side and Cinna threw the lid at the exposed open end, trying to seal it up. Before he could fit it tight, though, a pair of feet lashed out from inside, jamming the lid against the man’s nasally bulb. Cinna gave a garbled squeal and rolled onto his back like an injured turtle, clutching his busted nose.

Marcus and Tatta panicked and dove for the loose lid as well as their crying comrade, inadvertently taking their hands off the barrel, which teetered and then started to roll down the inclined street.

“Ah, ah, it’s getting away!” Blank blurted out, and took off after it.
“Shit!” Tatta and Marcus cursed in turn, and then followed.

The barrel accelerated impressively fast, barely out-rolling its on-foot pursuers. It hit a significant speed boost at the first flight of descending stairs. The spinning container bounced violently off the steps and into a crash-course with pedestrians that shrieked and scrambled out of dodge.

Meanwhile, a heavy-set, furry man exited a clock-tower hideaway, stepped off the front porch and stretched his limbs with a roaring yawn, just as a barrel flew beneath his nose, then one of his workers, and then another, and then another.

“…What the—?” the man muttered and watched the frenzied procession disappear around the next corner.

Blank, Marcus, and then Tatta struggled to keep the pace, shoving aside whomever they needed to

while Cinna pathetically held up the far rear. He recognized the part of town they were racing through—the group's hideout was on that very street. He shuffled along as fast as he could, but lost sight of the rabble down another stepping ramp. "Waaaaaaiiiiiiiiit," he was calling in their footsteps, as if any of them would listen.

Suddenly, the ground felt light beneath his feet. It took a moment to notice that he was in front of their hideout. It took the next moment for Cinna to realize that he was paddling his legs through thin air, for someone was holding him up by the collar.
It took the moment after that to recognize the man holding him.

Blank was nearly within reach of the tumbling barrel, just one more foot and—
The barrel kicked off some stairs at a sidelong angle, sailing over the guard rail and plummeting three stories. It struck a roof, skidded off and landed with a rattling thunk in the next neighborhood, out of sight.
"Damnit!"

At length Marcus and Tatta caught up with him, both out of breath. They leaned over the stair's rail

after Blank’s example, searching the avenues far below.

“What?” Tatta huffed, “Where’d he go?”

“Down there somewheres,” Blank replied, defeat already in his voice.

“That’s the Residential District,” Marcus informed. “The fastest way to get down there is to catch an aircab.”

“It’ll be too late then, damnit.” Tatta scuffed the brick steps with his heel, frustrated. “And he almost had ’im!”

“Uh, guys…”

It was the helpless, wavering pitch to Cinna’s voice more than anything that turned the group around. Looking up the stairs, they found their friend dangling from the stern grip of a great, tall, bat-eared man. His furry shins and full beard were lilac-hued and bristling with a deep frown, and most luckily for the group he was wearing his pilot’s cap with the goggles that obscured his surely burning glare.

The question was dead on the table. “The hell’s goin’ on?”

Blank slipped behind Marcus, who gulped. “Uhh…”

Tatta was the one to finally clear his throat. “… It’s a funny story, Baku.”

Baku didn’t think it was a very funny story.

The guys were sure for a moment that Tatta was going to weave some fantastic alibi to alleviate their case—it’s what any of them would have done, were they given the chance to speak—anything to lessen or forestall wrath from “the boss.”
However, Baku and Tatta’s rapport was on a different level than “boss and grunt.” Having founded their acting troupe, Tantalus, together, they were more like partners, or even brothers. In the end they would always be straight with one another, no matter what tricks took place on the side.

This didn’t necessarily stop Baku from being pissed beyond relief, nor did he believe the gang’s tale. He’d effectively kicked the responsible party out of the hideout and forbid their return until one hundred gil in its entirety were somehow restored to the “war chest.” Tatta’s determined rejoinder was

that he would drag in five times that once he caught the culprit of the hour.

Blank didn't see it happening, though. From his viewpoint, they stood a better chance of outrunning a chocobo than they did of catching that wily kid.

The rookie wandered the streets all the next day, keeping an eye out for "an opportunity," whatever Tatta meant. The lad eventually tired of the fruitless, aimless hunt and gave his rump a rest on a park bench.

He propped his elbows on his knees and his chin in his palms and sighed. Blank felt useless. He wondered if he'd always be the runt of the gang, for no other excuse than his age. He was twelve now, but what about when he was fourteen? Sixteen? (That's how old Marcus was.) Would he still be "the rookie"? Boss didn't even consider him an official member yet; he had to be "initiated" or something first, which vaguely constituted an impressive stunt or find. If only he could pull off some worthy feat… like catching the monkey, heh.

His stomach complained. There was a bakery a little ways behind him, on the other side of street—maybe he could pick up a penny-pincher's supper, with the two gil left on him. When the lad stood up

and stretched, some graffiti caught his eye from the pass between the two apartments he was facing. Curiosity calling, he stalked into the alley for a clear look.

Apparently he walked into some kind of hobo's nest. The newspapers and flattened cardboard boxes had that suspect "slept in" look, with a rumpled sheet on the ground to complement them. The main attraction, however, was the red brick wall opposite the "bed," which was occupied by chalky white doodles.

It looked like something he'd see on a playground sidewalk: fickle, crude, childish renditions meant to wash away in the next rain. There seemed to be some kind of sentimental quality to these, however, as if they were drawn to last. The drawings progressed from right to left along the bottom of the wall, from things faded with age and runoff to bright, recent things. Blank studied the mural for a while, trying to extract meaning from it all.

A mushroom cloud? With lots of dangling tentacle-things, or vines, and spidery legs, or roots.
A fluffy cloud with curly horns and four little hooves.

A classic stick-figure girl (or a guy in drag?), with a flower drawn onto the triangle representing her dress and a funny little point growing off the top of her head. Maybe a very tiny hat?
A canine of sorts, with sharp fangs.
Perhaps creepiest, a large eye with a slitted pupil, like a cat's.
A sailboat on wavy water.
A snowman-esque stack of balls, with a pig's snout, a mean slant to the eyes and a large stick in its hand.…A barrel?

The most nagging article was the stick figure guy (or person of ambiguous gender?) wedged between the sheep and the girl. Sticking out of the drawing's hip was a curvy line he'd almost mistaken for a third leg.

No… it's a tail.

Blank got the picture. Next he hurriedly searched the alley, shuffling around trashcans and overturning boxes, but to no avail; he didn't find the money.

He considered his find altogether, turned and ran back to the others. Tatta would hatch a great plan, for sure.

Monkey retired early that night. That sickly sensation plaguing him in the mornings was now creeping on him in the evenings, and he didn't feel very well anymore. His head felt waterlogged and muddled and his skin felt sticky and hot to the touch, yet he was shivering cold. It was frightening to not know what was happening to him, but all he could do was curl up under his sheet and sleep it off.

He was miserably asleep when he woke up from a particularly vivid dream to the alarmingly vivid reality of being caught in some kind of web, like a spider's. He sat up with a yelp and his surroundings all shifted and chattered at once. The shadows scuffled loudly over the pavement and spoke with human voices, as many as three of them, and suddenly strong arms were pulling a reticulated blanket over him. He kicked and screamed, but the more he did so the more entangled he became, until he felt like he might choke on the net.

"G'night, kid!"

Monkey's struggling was finally put to rest when something very hard and heavy bunted him dead on the scalp.

“Uhh…”

The boy’s awareness came around into a different breed of trap. His head lolled groggily against a concave wall of metal strings, which startled him awake. He blinked, drawing in his new container. It was about the size and shape of a barrel, only crafted of fine brass wires that ran from bottom to top, where they melded together for a dome cap.

He could look out through the mesh of his cage at his environment. It was an indoor place, he noticed first. The wooden floorboards, walls and rafters were lit to auburn hues by lamps and candles that encircled the room on stubby shelves. What furniture he saw was more practical—economical, even—than showy. A pair of bunk beds and a sofa with a spring punching between the cushions hugged one wall, and another twin bed took the opposite wall. The floor was littered with loose boards and crumpled magazines. The far, dark side of the room was a puzzle of cogs and ropes highlighted pale blue by starlight that filtered in through the belfry above.

His cage, some kind of paperweight for a spattering of cards, was planted atop a stumpy, round table in the light side of the room, the part that concerned him most. He was surrounded by people,

and if his best guess served him right, they were talking about him.

Monkey already knew four of them: the redheaded kid, the black bear, the tattooed man and the plump one with the hammer (come to think of it, his head smarted as with a blow from one). The unfamiliars were two stout, hornless bull-persons, each with varying shades of blue fur and glossy, hooked pincers for hooves, and a large, bearded man with goggles, with whom the bear was conferring as the two shared the sofa.

"…money back?"
"No. We were hoping we would, but the alley was clean. Didn't even find Marcus's purse."
"Think you can make him talk?"
"Blank thinks he's an outlander—doesn't know standard. I'm starting to agree."
"But you say we can still sell 'im back to Don? You sure he even belongs to him?"
"Oh yeah, I'm sure. I saw Don workin' with the kid a week ago, when I went to visit him. It'd be just like the man to rig his own tourney."
"So you say he's a brawler?"
"A damn good one. Don't let his size fool ya."

“He bust us up hella good the first time we tried to catch ’im,” the redhead supplied.

“Hey, he’s awake,” one of the bulls alerted.

The hammer guy hopped over to his cage and peered inside hungrily. “Rise and shine, ya little bastard!”

Monkey swallowed. These people had him, and they probably weren’t very happy at all. He had to get away, he had to get out…

The tattooed man was over him, next. “Where’s our money, kid?”

When Monkey didn’t respond, hammer guy took his cage by its pinpoint top and rattled it fiercely, jarring a yelp from the boy. “We asked where you put our money!”

“I told you guys it’s no use; he can’t understand us,” the redhead reiterated.

Hammerguy retreated a step, frustrated. “Then what’re we gonna do?”

“I told you boys, we’re gonna fork him over to Don for a reward,” assured the bear.

“What makes you think he’ll give us anything for ’im?” questioned tattooman. “We already got five hundred out of Don.”

“Yeah, but he don’t know that was us,” the bear responded, ‘The bet was just in your name, right Marcus?’
“Yeah… that’s right.”

“So, we take him to Undertown in the morning, right?” one the bulls wanted to know.

The bear turned a look to the other man on the sofa. “It’s up to the boss.”

The man in charge leaned back into the cushions and scratched his beard thoughtfully. “Hmm…” Monkey shrank against the bars of his cage, away from the boss’s fixed stare.

All of a sudden, beardman pitched forward and onto his feet, laughing a couple of blasting notes. “Bwah, ha!”

“Uh-oh, Boss got an idea…” tattooman mumbled.

“Yer damn right I do!” verified Boss. He aimed a thick finger at the monkey-cage. ‘We’ll take him over to Don tomorrow, but first we’re gonna have a

little fun. I say kill two monkeys with one stone.’ He slapped his rotund belly like a drum for another rumbling laugh. “Bwahaha.”

“Fun? How?” wondered hammerguy.

Boss twisted a look onto the redhead. “Hey rookie, how’s about time you got initiated, old school style?”

The mentioned kid tensed up, his eyes bulging. “What!”

“Whoa-ho!” The bear’s ears perked up. “I say this’s a damn low wager, Baku.”

Boss only laughed some more. “Nah, it’ll be good! Com’on, you lazy bums, let’s move it to the basement!”

The bearded man ushered the group down through a door that popped out of the floor. Two of the bulls were ordered to bring Monkey with them, and they picked up his cage from the bottom and top. The prisoner spun around the confined space in questing circles, prying for a way to break free, but his captors only chuckled when he bit down on their pincer-mitts, squeaked and then instantly recoiled a chipped tooth. They had shiny rock talons for hands! “Heheh, serves ya right,” one of them heckled.

The chamber he was lowered into was ominously dark, not a window for relief. Some of the men began busily lighting lamps off the high ceiling, to reveal a large, open deck. Into the shadowy corners were stacked crates, cardboard boxes, and mounds of straw, pillows and quilts.

Monkey's cage was plopped down in the middle of the floor, the men forming a roomy circle around it. Their talk was high and excited, as with a game.

The only one who didn't seem too eager was the redhead. "You want me to do what now?" he asked his boss, trepidation in his stance.

"Boy," Boss began in a booming voice, for which the others quieted, 'It's about time you became a full-fledged member of Tantalus.' The others nodded and grunted consent. "If you can take down this monkey one-on-one, you're in."

"But, but…!" the redhead shrilly protested.

"No 'but's!" the boss snuffed his objection out, "A Tantalus never says 'but!' He says 'yes Boss' and he gets the job done!"

"Woo hoo!" two of the bulls jumped and whooped in unison. 'Gonna have a good ol' fashioned rumble!'

“Oh yeah, bring on the rumble,” Marcus followed, pumping his arm enthusiastically.
“Give us a good show, kid,” the bear egged their subject on.

The kid seemed flustered with panic. “I… but…”

The bear patted him on the back. “You’ll do fine! We won’t let ya get hurt. We’ll stop the fight ’fore that happens.” He straightened and glanced back to his associate. “Hey Baku, give the rookie a whoopass stick, to even the field. This monkey ain’t as lightweight as he looks.”

Boss shifted through a pile of junk in the back and procured a plain wooden club, which he tossed to the redhead. “There ya go! Knock ’im dead! Bwahahaha.”

Monkey watched the goings-on from his cage, as baffled as ever. All of the men stood far back, taking perches along the crates and against the walls, except for the boy with the big stick and the two bulls who had carried him into this faux arena. Without any processable warning his escorts snapped off the hinges on the bottom of the cage, lifted the top clean off and carried it away, leaving the boy in the open.

The redhead with the stick began to advance on him, his battle-ready posture belying the hesitation in his eyes. He pursed his lips together, firm with resolve, and then took his first swing at Monkey.

It was a fight, then—that much became clear through the feverish buzzing in Monkey's head. The men in the shadows became a phantom audience, rooting on an all-too-familiar rhythm, and the torch-lit circle was then a ring—just a boy and his opponent. The floor began to vibrate with a clapping, stomping beat. "Rumble, rumble, rumble" was the chant.

Monkey fell back, the swipe of the club licking the tips of his hair, and then rolled to the side out of the next, downward blow. He sprang to his hands and feet and danced to dodge the next three swings, which became progressively more aggressive.

Blank was not giving this kid a chance. He had to knock him down hard and fast, before the fight got out of hand. The club would prove an effective means, if the monkey would stand still for a second to take the hit. He was skipping around in circles, swinging at every monkey-shadow that fell at his feet, but its owner was too damn lithe and quick and

the jeering of his brothers was becoming distracting — “Quit swingin’ at thin air, boy!”

The redhead let the end of a full swing drop to the floor for a pause, during which Monkey pounced on his shoulder in a leaping tackle. Both boys hit the gritty turf, Blank yet clutching his weapon, even though Monkey had moved to sit on his wielding arm. The wild boy took two handfuls of Blank’s fiery locks and thumped his head harshly against the floorboards, evoking a barrage of sparks behind the redhead’s eyes. Between dizzy bursts Blank threw out his free fist and landed a punch squarely on Monkey’s cheek, and the boy released his hair with a coughing grunt.

Blank took the flinching initiative to push the monkey off his other arm, but Monkey pushed right back before the redhead could take up the club again, forcing it out of his grasp. Blank dipped to pick it back up, Monkey blocked the reach, and in the next moment the two were in a grappling match. The taller boy braced himself on wide footing and forced the be-tailed one to his knees, taking advantage of his own maturing strength.

Monkey accepted the floor and invited Blank to join him with a sweeping kick to the heels. A

protruding nail head greeted Blank's back as soon as he hit the ground, and the lad cringed into an arch to extricate his back from the biting iron. Monkey borrowed this time to scoop up the club with his long tail and pass it to his waiting hands. Blank had hardly recovered his wits when the head of own his weapon came sailing down against him, knocking the wind out of his gut and pressing his spine into the nail again.

Blank gasped and hissed, reflexively tucking his knees up to his chest. He felt a damp, sticky spot eating up the fabric of his vest where the nail head carved a rent. He popped his eyelids open and focused on his misplaced club, which was climbing over Monkey's head in preparation for another strike. Blank brought up his boots to catch the downswing in the dip of his soles.

He wasn't going to lose to a monkey! This was too important to lose; everyone was watching—his Tantalus brothers, that is—and if he let a little kid who had to be half his age get the better of him, one of Don's elite fighters regardless…

Blank bunted the club aside with his toes and tumbled to his feet again. He knew how to fight, a little bit; Marcus had taken him aside once and

shown him the basics, like how to ball a fist that wouldn't crush his own thumb on impact.
Monkey swung the club sideways, and Blank wrapped his arms around it, paying a stubbed pinky for his weapon back. He wrenched the fat stick from Monkey's grasp, pulled it back and swung high. The little boy naturally dropped low to avoid it, and then punched forward, smacking Blank right in the crotch.

"Foul!" Cinna's voice.

Monkey kept driving, pushing both to the ground again while Blank was still reeling, and then another scuffle over the club ensued. It turned into a regular catfight, both rolling frantically over the ground, fists and fur flying.
When the world finally quit spinning Blank was on his back again, staring up into the sweaty, pallid face of the boy strangling him. The redhead gritted his teeth and squirmed, pressing up against Monkey's weight, but the kid was stronger than he estimated and his calloused hands were *really* heavy on his throat—he couldn't breathe—shit the little guy looked almost as bad as he did, and *he* was the one choking—oh the room was getting darker, somebody light another candle…

“Bwahahaha!”
The rest of the gang was on them like a mob, tearing one boy off the other to Baku’s roaring laughter in the background. Blank was only catching his breath while Tatta and Marcus pulled him to his feet and brushed him off. Everyone was talking at once.
“Shit that was crazy!”
“Did you see that nut-hit? Ouch, man.”
“You lasted longer than I thought you would, rookie!”
“Woo!”

Through the bedlam, the boss’s big hand fell on his shoulder. “I’m impressed, boy!”
Blank grinned like an idiot—his mind was yet catching up with him—did he even win? He didn’t think so—but the boss was impressed! He must have done *something* right.

Thrown decidedly off his opponent, Monkey staggered backwards and out of the fray. The bulls immediately encroached on him, clubs of their own and a net in their hands, though it wasn’t necessary. Monkey swayed wearily, fell forward onto his face and passed out.

Tantalus was faced with a quandary. The excitement over Blank's initiation was dampered by the realization that, first, the red-headed boy was slightly wounded, and secondly, that their captive monkey was more than a little under-the-weather. Blank needed only a thick bandage and a new vest to be as good as new, but after a cursory examination the crew determined that Monkey's condition was a little more grave.

The squabbling that followed mostly centered on the fact that if the kid died of pneumonia, he wouldn't be worth a penny to Don. Baku resourcefully put their anxieties to rest and vowed to nurse the child back to health himself, despite Tatta and others' protests, comparing the effort to coddling a flask of nitro.

Thus, Baku found himself sitting up on the sofa the rest of the night, a few vigilant candles and snoring from the surrounding bunks keeping him company while he cradled a monkey-tailed boy in his lap. Alone like so, he had only his wandering observations for entertainment.

The child was a strange send into his life. He was as filthy as the streets; mute for being either dumb, ignorant, or both; smelling of rust, charcoal and

fresh bread at once; tough as nails for his size, yet surprisingly fragile; and somehow a little cute, despite all. Baku tucked their shared quilt more snugly around the boy's shivering, bony form and stroked his greasy hair, wondering if there was actually a shred of something fair under the layers of muck. They'd found him sleeping in an alley amongst trash… Baku wondered if the kid had anything like a family, or even knew what family was. Or what about mundane luxuries, such as a mattress—or shoes?

The child coughed faintly into his shoulder. Baku carefully leaned forward and picked up a baby-bottle filled with potion from the coffee table (a odd boon to being in the theater business was that you had access to an eclectic array of props—also, Cinna insisted on calling a sawed-off wooden crate with a sheet of plywood nailed on top a coffee table, and no one bothered to fight him there.)

The man somehow navigated the medicine into the boy's mouth, as opposed to on the quilt or all over the puke-stains on the upholstery, and Monkey suckled on the bottle in an oblivious haze. His tiny fingers fumbled around Baku's wrists, as if seeking some distant, fickle purchase, and his droopy gaze was cloudy with fever-ridden dreams. The boss was

actually startled when a tabby's rumble began to issue from the half-dozing child. Was he *purring*? Like a cat? Baku bent close and put an ear to the boy's hair, confirming the feline quirk.

He'd have to reconsider the boy's "monkey" rank.

Baku wasn't sure whether to believe the claim that Monkey was fighting for Don in his tourneys; he didn't at first, but then, even while on the (later apparent) verge of collapse he nearly strangled Blank to death.

Speaking of the devil, the redheaded boy snuck back inside from a bathroom break, stopping by the sofa on the way to his bunk.

"Hey kiddo," Baku hailed him, "You all right now?"

Blank could have rolled his eyes, since apparently, after all that hard work and wait, he'd traded the "rookie" appellation for 'kiddo.'
"Yeah, I'm okay. How's he doin'?" the redhead responded, keeping their conversation in whispers, and crawled into whatever cushion space Baku's sprawling figure hadn't consumed.

Baku steadied the bottle with one hand and smoothed back the monkey's bangs with the other, testing his temperature. "Still burnin' up."

"Hmm." Blank frowned. "I hope he'll be okay."

Baku huffed, a lopsided grin crossing his beard. "Don't want our little investment to croak, eh?"

"Well, uh, yeah," Blank stumbled over the right answer, "But I just don't want him to die, neither. I mean, it wouldn't be fair."

"Fair?" Baku knitted his bushy eyebrows.

"Well, he's all little. He hasn't had much of a chance yet, y'know? Maybe he wants to grow up and see the world, or stuff. I think e'rybody should get that chance."

Monkey mumbled something unintelligible and Baku withdrew the bottle, setting it back on the table. He then ruffled Blank's scarlet mop. "You got heart, kiddo." Blank, for someone yet so young himself, shared rather precocious insights at times; Baku would dare say he was the wisest of the lot.

"Enough heart to be a real member of Tantalus, right?" Blank beamed craftily.

Baku shook with a low chuckle, careful not to disturb his charge. “Hoho, way to milk it. You’ve got a big enough head to be a Tantalus now, I’ll tell you that.”

Blank blushed, embarrassed, and changed the subject. “So… When he gets better, we’re gonna take him to Don?”

“That’s the plan. *If* he gets better,” Baku noted the crucial point.

“You know, we don’t even know his name,” Blank realized out loud. “Don just had him listed as ‘The Flying Monkey’ for his tourney.”

“Uhh… huh.” Baku reached around the invalid child’s neck, tugging free a thin, grungy chain and its silver card from the recesses of his shirt. ‘I noticed this dog-tag on ’im a while ago, but I can’t make anything out without my goggles.’ The boss gingerly pulled the chain over Monkey’s head and handed the trinket to Blank. “You take a look at it, boy.”

Blank inspected the tag’s inscriptions in the candlelight. He squinted over the obscure, foreign writing on one side. “It’s… I don’t know. It’s all

funny-lookin' letters." He then turned it over. "… Oh, um…"

"What?" Baku pressed, the suspense wearing thin on his patience.

"There's more squiggly lines, numbers, and a word," Blank reported, "9268475 — ZIDANE."

"Zidane?" the boss echoed.

Blank nodded. "Is that his name, you think? Or his owner's? Or what?"

Baku shrugged lightly, took the tag back from Blank and pocketed it. "Well it better be his name, 'cause that's what I'm gonna start calling him."

Miracle or not (Baku wasn't exactly a religious man, or only religious as far as he could use a deity's name in vain), the boy recovered in a couple of days.

At first shy and feral towards the group, "Zidane" eventually adjusted to the idea that nobody in the hideout wanted to kill him, and relaxed considerably. As his ailment faded and his energy returned, the troupe started to regard him as a

boisterous pet—one that desperately needed a bath and housebreaking, among other things.

Still wary of the others, Zidane clung with smothering tenacity to Baku, the one that appeared most interested in the child's well being. Boss didn't seem especially irked by the attention (or the ribbing he received from the others thanks to it), and allowed Zidane to follow his heels all day long, like a lost puppy.

"Basu!"

Efforts to acquaint him with rudimentary standard language, on the other hand, were frustratingly slow.

"No, damnit. My name is Baku and you call me Boss."

Baku was at his usual roost, on the sofa, scrutinizing his hand of cards while Tatta watched from the sidelines and Marcus took his turn on the other side of the "coffee table." Blank had stowed away in the attic, playing at stealth, Cinna was in their makeshift kitchenette forming a strategy for lunch, and the bulls were out at work, tending to the Prima Vista. Zidane was perched on the boss's shoulders, spying on the card game over Baku's

head and trying to figure out what was so alluring about staring at random pictures of monsters for minutes at a time.

“Basu!” the boy crowed defiantly, and giggled.

“Argh.” Baku gave a smoldering sigh and placed his next card. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say this kid is playing stupid on purpose.”

“It has a nice ring to it, Basu,” Tatta chortled. Marcus sniggered.

“Shut up.”

The front door boomed with knocking.

“Got it,” chimed Blank, who appeared in a flash, skidded down a rope dropping out of the attic and jumped to the hideout’s entrance.

“Who is it?” Tatta called out.

“Uh…” A pause followed as the messenger boy gathered information. “Two guys. One says he’s Riz. Who’s that?”

“Let ’em in,” Baku gave the word, and stood up from his game.
“Huh. Looks like Don sent his goons to pick up the kid,” Tatta noted, ‘That saves us the trouble.’

“That must mean they really want Zidane back,” Marcus speculated.

The troupe watched a tall, dark man waltz in, an aardvark sticking close behind him. Baku’s first disquieting observation was that Riz was wearing a glossy, slightly oversized red coat, something he last saw on Don. The second red flag was that Zidane, upon the two’s entry, slid off Baku’s shoulder with an audible, nervous gulp and hid behind the boss’s kneecaps, hugging his legs with a death-grip.

“Baku Tribal, you son of a bitch,” Riz warmly greeted. “I remember when you used to work for us.”

“Gee, Riz, what a pleasure to see you,” Baku returned the sentiment, his voice only a little caustic yet. “What, Don doesn’t make house calls?”

The redcoat shifted on his feet, turned his gaze to the ground for a moment and chuckled darkly. “Oh, eheheh, not anymore. Don’s dead.”

Silence poured into the hideout like a load of bricks. The present members of Tantalus exchanged mixed looks of shock, alarm and disappointment.

“Dead? How?” Baku asked.

Benny piped up. “He was murdered almost a week ago.”

“Murdered…?” Tatta stepped forward, as if he had not heard well enough and needed to be closer. “Who would do that?”

Riz straightened and aimed a smirk at the Tantalus leader that could almost be called amused. “That’s the funny part, Baku. He’s standing right behind you.”

Half the room’s occupants gaped at the news. The next word out of Marcus’s mouth echoed the group’s thought. “What.”

Baku glanced to the child sitting at his feet, looked back to Riz and adopted an incredulous scowl. “You expect me to believe a little runt like this took down the lord of Undertown?” The boss fought not to expose his doubt, one that argued that it was actually very possible.

Riz offered an easygoing shrug. “I don’t expect you to believe anything. I came here to make a deal. The fact of it is, Don didn’t have any intentions of keeping the kid. He was actually gonna let him loose after that last tourney. But now that Don’s dead,

things are a little more…" He paused and rolled his wrist for emphasis. "…Complicated."

"That ain't so?"

"Yeah, you see, Undertown is undergoing an, oh, change of management right now. Sometimes that can be a very tricky process. Sometimes it can get costly. Real costly. It would pay to have a cold-blooded killer on our side, to help make things run… smoothly. Are you gettin' my meanin'?"

Baku jumped to his conclusion. "You want the kid to do your dirty work."

Riz flashed a grin. "Always were right on top of things, Baku. Now, here's the deal: I'm willin' to give you two hundred for the boy."

Tatta tried to catch Baku's eye, to signal that it was a good deal, but Boss was fixed on the redcoat before him. Baku then stole a glimpse at the child cowering behind him, who turned up a stark-pale, terrified expression, inches away from tears.

"…Basu…" Zidane whimpered, his voice small and pleading.

"Com'on, Baku," Riz spurred on the negotiation when Baku hesitated, "I know you're hard-up for

cash. Why else did Tatta come down askin' for Don's favor? Last I heard you only got a hundred gil left in your little piggy bank. You've got no reason to keep that monkey around. I take him off your hands, get to settle Don's score, and you walk away with twice what you started with. It's win-win for everyone."

"Except the boy."

"Heh," both Riz and Benny laughed shortly. The latter remarked, "I didn't know big ol' Baku Tribal had a soft-spot for kids."

"It's not as much a soft spot for kids as it is a good eye for douchebags," Baku retorted, a snarl evident in his tone. "I can't say I like the little ring you got goin'. It's why I quit in the first place. Now I thought real hard since I called you fellas, and I decided that if I hand over this kid to you to do whatever you want with, like you were before, I'd be as much of a spineless, money-grubbing asshole as the rest of you."

Riz's mien hardened. "Are you saying no deal?"

Baku crossed his arms, his decision firmly set. "I'm sayin' no deal."

Again, a daunting silence. Nobody could believe what they heard, except for Zidane, who simply didn't know what he heard.

A dark, bitter thread crossed Riz's face. "You do realize that boy's our property, right? We're being damn generous with our offer, but we can just up and take him back if we have to."

"You don't own this kid any more than you own that shitty looking jacket. Was Don even cold before you ripped it off his dead shoulders?"

Benny puffed up, visibly outraged, and Riz's nostrils flared. "You're making a big mistake, Baku. It don't pay to insult us."

"From where I'm standin'," Baku came back, not missing a beat, "You and your buddy are outnumbered. Now get the unholy fuck out of my hideout, before I bash your skulls in."

To drive their boss's point home, Marcus stood up, taking a place next to Tatta. Blank and Cinna joined them, looking as intimidating as they could for a twelve-year-old and a fat little man with a skillet.

The two guests festered in the strained, angry atmosphere for a moment before Riz turned and

stomped away, leaving Benny to follow suit. “Fuck this. You can keep the stupid brat, for all I care.”

The hideout’s door slammed shut, and they were gone.

Cinna threw up a “to hell with you guys” shrug and returned to the stove.
Blank whistled. “Phew. Wow.”
“I can’t believe you told him off like that,” Marcus spoke, his voice subdued with lingering awe.
Tatta shook his head, snapping out of a daze, and stared at Baku. “I can’t believe you just turned down two hundred gil!”

Baku blinked at the door, bunched up his lips thoughtfully, and then said, “Believe me, nobody’s more surprised than I am.” He then let out a huge, pent-up breath and deflated onto the sofa, Zidane scurrying out from under his collapsing girth.

“You realize, of course, that this makes us screwed this winter,” Tatta reminded him.

“Yep,” Baku answered flatly.

“And now we have another mouth to feed,” the bear added.

“Yep.”

Marcus mustered a perplexed frown. “So… we’re keeping this kid?”

Zidane, meanwhile, stood back, tossing wide looks between the boss, the other men and the threshold that Riz and Benny had just crossed to leave. The boy then stared vacantly into the floor, seemingly lost in thought, before perking back up, a broad grin on his face.

“Hehehe,” was the last he was heard of before he spun on his heel and sprinted out the front door.

Tantalus collectively stared after the vanished boy, once again shocked to silence. “Why… the hell…” Marcus couldn’t even form a solid sentence.

Tatta clicked his tongue, aghast and yet not terribly surprised. “I guess that’s a no.”

Blank didn’t settle for “no.” He dashed outside right behind Zidane, trying to tail the kid, though past experience should have taught him better than to try. He lost the wild boy over another apparently-not-so-unassailable-if-you’re-a-flying-monkey urban precipice, and was left to return to the hideout.

The redhead didn’t even bother going back inside to relay his failure to the others. He dejectedly plopped down on the front steps, propped his chin in

his hands and wondered why. Why did Zidane leave so abruptly, after all they had done for him? Did he even understand what the boss just did?

A vague, brooding while later, Blank received his answer. A little monkey-shape came running up the road, which the redhead recognized instantly. “Hey, you’re back!”
Blank leapt out onto the street and met up with the elusive Zidane, who was still panting from his speedy errand. Only on the closer look did Blank notice the boy was carrying a purse in his arms. “Hey, is that…?”

Zidane didn’t hesitate for Blank’s query, instead rushing up the steps and into the hideout. He marched right onto the center of the floor, all eyes on him, and slammed down the purse with a dramatic flair. It ruptured on impact, coins spraying all over the ground.

“Whoa shit, money!” Marcus made the call, and a maddening scene unfolded as everybody present, save two, pounced on the pile of gil, tearing for every last piece. Baku gawked at the din from the safety of his sofa’s groove, dumbfounded, and even more so when Zidane boldly jumped onto the coffee table and held out an open hand demandingly.

“What?” he asked, entirely clueless.

Zidane beat his chest emphatically and then held out his palm to Baku again, a pout brewing on his face.

It took about a whole minute and a lot of pointing for Baku to register the kid’s intent. “Oh! Bwahaha!” He fished Zidane’s dog-tag from his pocket and obligingly returned it to the boy, who donned it with a happy squeal.

“You were just buyin’ back your little tag,” the boss realized.
“Hee,” Zidane made a pleased noise and bounced into Baku’s lap, drawing an, “Oaf!” from the big man. As the child settled onto Baku’s knee, the leader looked out over the impending fistfight over how to divide up the surplus gil.

Baku hummed disdainfully and then tousled the child’s hair with casual affection. “You just bought me a lot of trouble, boy.”

Zidane didn’t understand, necessarily, but he didn’t feel like he needed to. Suddenly he was in a place where people weren’t shunning his every move. It was a warm, dry, well-worn, safe place, filled with people that, in their own peculiar way,

were kind to him—welcoming, even. It was a new, strange feeling to be with these people, who were like everyone else he'd ever met and then not really.

Together, they were a family, and this was their home, and that was the truth.

Zitan wouldn't care for it.

But Zidane understood.

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